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HECTOR

FLORA L. SHAW





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HECTOR.



HECTOR

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HECTOR

A STORY FOR YOUNG PEOPLE.

BY

FLORA L. SHAW,

AUTHOR OF "CASTLE BLAIR," ETC.

WITH EIGHT ILLUSTRATIONS BY W. J. HENNESSY.



LONDON: GEORGE BELL AND SONS,
YORK STREET, COVENT GARDEN.

1883.

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the morning, for the first time, I saw the old woman. She was sitting on the porch, looking out at the sea. She was very old, and her face was wrinkled. She was wearing a blue dress and a white shawl. She was looking at me with a sad expression. I went over to her and sat down. She told me that she had been married for forty years, and that her husband had died. She was now alone. I told her that I was a doctor, and that I would take care of her. She looked at me for a long time, and then she said, "You are a good man. I will trust you." I took her hand and said, "I will take care of you, old woman. I will make you happy again." She smiled at me, and I knew that I had found my patient.

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my own cheeks flush with surprise, and I glanced up eager to see what she would do. But the stitches of her heel were not counted yet, and she went on aloud—sixteen, seventeen, eighteen—not stretching her hand for the letter till the heel was safely separate on its third needle.

Then, when she had looked at the post-mark and closely examined the writing, she glanced down sharply at my eager face, and said as she pulled out her spectacles :

“I hear the hens clucking. They are hungry, go you and give them their food.”

I could have cried for disappointment, but Grand-mère would never be gainsaid. So I got up very slowly and went away ; and the big hens had all the corn that day, for I took no thought of the chickens, but just spilled the Indian corn angrily about the yard, till Madelon put her head out of the kitchen window and remarked to Jean :

“Oh, the famous housekeeper ! We shall show fat fowls in the market next Saturday.” And that made me shut down the corn-bin with a bang and run straight back to the porch to escape from Jean’s stupid laughter.

I could see Sœur Amélie’s cornette flapping as I came round the corner of the house, which proved she was in full flow of conversation. The letter had

leaf, and I sat in the porch spinning by Grandmère, looking down over the yellow mustard fields and vineyards red with opening anemones.

Grandmère was busy counting off the stitches for the heel of the stocking that she was knitting, so she had told me to hold my tongue when I chattered, and I was trying to amuse myself by listening to the black-birds piping and singing in the great stone-pine by the door; when presently I saw the white cornette of Sœur Amélie coming round the elder clump at the end of the lane.

I never cared much to see her in the morning, for in the morning she came to teach me to read and write, and learn *L'Histoire Sainte*; and as the money Grandmère paid her for that was to go to build a chapel for the sisters at Baitgz, I felt always very, very wicked if I was not good. But when she came in the afternoon it was generally to chat over the news, and I liked to hear the news. It was so dull to listen all day to the cooing of the pigeons up on the roof and the click of the needles in Grandmère's stocking.

To-day as she came I saw that she had a letter in her hand.

"I met the priest at the end of the lane," she said, "and he told me to save him the walk."

Grandmère felt

my own cheeks flush with surprise, and I glanced up eager to see what she would do. But the stitches of her heel were not counted yet, and she went on aloud—sixteen, seventeen, eighteen—not stretching her hand for the letter till the heel was safely separate on its third needle.

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scolding. I saw the Sœur Amélie’s cornette flapping as I ran round the corner of the house, which proved the end of the flow of conversation. The letter had

disappeared ; no doubt into Grandmère's great apron pocket, to keep company with the keys and her wool ball. But I hoped yet to glean something from the conversation.

Grandmère's eyes were unusually bright, and the decided look on her face piqued my curiosity to the quick. I had never seen her look so, except at harvest-times or when there was business to be done.

Her eye fell on me the moment I came round the corner.

"Fast day for the fowls, Hein?" she said; but the next moment she laughed good-humouredly, and while I blushed scarlet to feel myself thus found out, she called me to her, and said:

"After all, the news concerns you more than any of us, since it is you who will gain a companion; and I do not see why you should not hear that the son of your cousin Marie, who died last year in England, is coming to live with us. He is an orphan, like you, for his father too is lately dead, and he is less happy than you, for his grandparents do not want him at all, but gladly send him to his mother's relations. Therefore his heart may likely enough be sore when he comes, and you will do your best to be kind to him."

"Poor child," she continued, to Sœur Amélie; "neither father nor mother now, and I remember how his mother rejoiced over him not two years ago.

Beautiful, she told me, and strong and clever like his father, but even then the family did not love him; their hearts were always of ice for his mother. They were jealous, perhaps; and now—ah bah! they are a selfish people, the English. With their *droit d'aînesse*, they have no place for the orphans of younger children. Here he will find no *grandeurs*, but there is enough, thank God, of everything we need; and so far as heart goes, this little one will love him. As for me, I loved his mother; I am too old now to love newcomers."

Grandmère patted my head while she spoke, and I kissed her brown wrinkled hand, and promised that I would love him for both of us. I did not say anything more, for Grandmère used not to like children to talk much; but I sat there, and thought of the promise I had made while Grandmère and Sœur Amélie continued to talk; and the more I thought, the more I felt that I would like to love little Hector. What Grandmère and Sœur Amélie were saying above my head made me picture him in my heart very sad and lonely. He had no sisters or brothers, they said. No more had I; and I wondered if he sometimes wished for a brother as I had sometimes wished for a little sister. I had never known my father and mother, so it was no grief to me to lose them; but he had known his. I thought of his mother, rejoicing

over him ; and then of her, dead and cold ; and he left all alone to the jealous family ; till the picture of his desolation brought tears to my eyes, and I had to try quickly to think of something else, for fear Grandmère might see and ask me what was the matter. I listened then with all my ears to what Grandmère and Sœur Amélie were saying, and I understood enough to know soon that Hector's grandfather was a rich English milord, but that Hector's father had been the youngest son, and his family had been angry with his imprudent marriage ; and now that he was dead, Hector's uncles were jealous because the boy was so strong and fine, while they had no sons yet to inherit their wealth. Already I felt a sisterly pride in him ; I was glad to know that he was strong and fine. I remembered suddenly with new interest how I had often heard Grandmère's friends congratulate her on the healthy air of Salaret, and I looked over our fields with joy at the thought that they would make him every day stronger and finer, till he grew up wonderful, like the Prince Charming of a fairy tale, and went home to astonish his wicked uncles. His uncles were going, Grandmère said, to have plenty of sons. I did not know how that would be, but I took for granted beforehand that our Hector would be more beautiful and more clever than any of his cousins.

Already he was to me "our Hector," and from that

day till the day he came I scarcely ceased to think of him. Salaret was like a new place since it had this new interest. I had never thought about it before. It had been always there, standing, just as it does now, on the side of the hill with the vineyards sloping down in front, and the orchard sloping up to the chestnut wood behind ; and I had been accustomed year after year to watch the blackbirds build in the big stone-pine by the door, and the ducks and geese swim round the little stagnant pond in front, while the pigs and fowls and oxen trampled the soft slush of the big farmyard, and the labourers came and went, without ever asking myself whether all this was pretty or pleasant. It was part of my life, and before that time I scarcely remember it ; but I remember quite distinctly now how it looked on the day that Hector came ; and, wherever I spend my future life, it is the picture of Salaret, as I saw it that day, which will always remain with me as the picture of home.

Everything had been made ready for Hector. Madelon had said that she would love no English boy. Her father lived in the mill which was the very last bit of land the English ever held in France, and he remembered the English Duke of Wellington ; so she thought she knew all about the English. She said they were hard and gluttonous, and very little civilized ; and she used to tease me about Hector,

saying beforehand that he would be ugly like a monkey. But for all that, she said the Duke was a great milord; and when she heard that Hector's grandfather was to accompany him, she had worked like four to make the house ready for the occasion. It was clean now, from top to bottom. In the drawing-room the windows had been opened and the floor fresh waxed and polished; a faint scent of honey rose from the shining boards and mixed with the sweet smell of the summer wash which the breeze from the garden blew out of the clean white dimity curtains. The brass dogs on the hearth had been polished; I had myself dusted the old-fashioned chimney-piece. Grandmère did not like to have flowers brought into the house, but the peach-trees outside were in full blossom, and their pink boughs crossed each other before the open windows, throwing rosy reflections upon the floor.

Upstairs, too, Hector's own little room was ready. Madelon had scrubbed it beautifully clean; Grandmère herself had given out a pair of the best linen sheets for his bed. They let me give him my patch-work quilt, and everything looked as comfortable as we could make it. Even the pigeons seemed pleased as they cooed on the window-sill and looked in. Then, when there was nothing more to do, and I had brushed and plaited my hair and put on my Sunday

dress and one of my Sunday white pinafores, Grand-mère took pity on my impatience, and told me to run down the lane and watch till I saw a carriage in sight on the high road. At the bottom of our lane there was a mound, with an old wooden cross upon it, and from the top of the mound you could see for a mile or two along the road; so I ran down through the lane where the hedges were all in flower with white thorn and gorse and periwinkles, and climbed on the mound to watch. But the carriage kept me waiting a long time, and while I waited, to make the time pass, I tried to fancy myself in Hector's place, and to imagine what then I should think of the new home to which I was coming. Instead of watching the high road, I had soon turned my back upon it, and for the first time in my life I really looked at Salaret. It is only a farmhouse, and to my childish eyes it did not look nearly grand enough, with its modest white walls and long straggling expanse of red-tiled roof which stretched in irregular gables over house and stables and store-houses; but the orchard spread up the hill behind like a sun-touched cloud of white and pink, the chestnut wood above was bursting into brilliant green, and in the lovely lights and shadows of the spring afternoon, the place touched my heart even then with a tender and homelike feeling. I thought that if I could have wished it more grand, I could hardly have wished

it more beautiful, and I hoped that little Hector would be glad to live there with me.

Grandmère stood waiting under the pine-tree by the porch, and I was looking at her and at the pigeons pecking and strutting on the path at her feet, when suddenly above the noise of the forge at the other side of the road a sound of wheels and trotting horses fell on my ear, and, before I had time even to jump off my post of observation, a grand carriage drawn by a pair of horses had dashed round the corner and was rolling swiftly in front of me up the lane.

CHAPTER II.

TO try to overtake the equipage was useless, and to run in the cloud of dust it raised would have been to make myself dirty as well as late. So, mortified as I was to have missed the first sight of Hector after all, and trembling with shyness at the thought of entering the drawing-room already full of strangers, I went slowly back to the house.

Grandmère and her visitors had gone in by the time I reached the door ; but there, standing in the porch alone, with his head in the air and eyes fixed eagerly on the thick branches of the stone-pine, was a little boy who must, I knew, be Hector. He wore a loose suit of rough black serge, made with a wide collar which fell back upon his shoulders, leaving his throat and chest bare, like a sailor's, to the air. His hat was in his hand, and the sun streamed upon the masses of ruddy gold hair which, though cut short, yet waved loosely above his strong square forehead.

Everything about him was strong and firm, the attitude in which he stood, the intensity of his gaze into the pine-tree, the curves of the white throat and uplifted chin. He was not the least bit like what I had expected, but I had time to look at him thoroughly, for he stood just in the middle of the porch, so that I could not pass into the house; and though on first seeing him I had put out my hand and stammered forth the best greeting that I could, he did not seem for some time to see me. As he would neither move out of my way nor take any notice of me himself, I waited quietly on the step beneath him, and my gaze followed his to the depths of the pine foliage; then after a moment or two he looked down, and his first words, spoken in French as pure as my own, and as quietly as though he had known me all my life, were:

"Are they thrushes or blackbirds? I can't get a sight of one."

I was red all over, not for shyness now, but for real pleasure to hear his voice and to be able to tell him what he wanted to know.

"They are blackbirds; and from the window of your bedroom you can see right into one of the nests."

"Right in, so as to see the eggs? Are there any eggs? Do you think we shall see the young ones when they are hatched?"

He turned fully to me now, and looked straight into my face, his own face all aglow with interest. I saw that his eyes were dark grey, and I thought they were the brightest I had ever seen.

"I think they will be hatched soon," I said, "because they have been laid a long time now; one might even come out to-day."

"Let us go up," he said, eagerly. "Let us go up; perhaps it will be out already."

In another moment we were upstairs in his room, and without seeming even to see the cupboard of carved oak, or the patchwork quilt, or the new mat Grandmère had bought for his bedside, he flung himself half out of the window in his anxiety to peep into the nest. The mother bird was sitting; we could not see the eggs, but she looked at us with soft bright eyes from beneath her interlaced canopy of green spikes, and I saw at once that Hector would no more have frightened her than I.

He looked at her very quietly for a time, his grey eyes sparkling with interest; then he asked me in a whisper if I knew much about birds.

I whispered, "No, that I only liked watching them sometimes, but that there were a great many at Salaret."

"Ah, that's the way it is with girls," he said, "they never know much about things; have you a bird

book?" I might have been offended, only that he spoke so quietly I saw he did not mean to be rude, and then I could not help thinking that with regard to me it was quite true. I did not know much about anything, I did not even know if we had a bird book, and I was so ashamed to confess my ignorance that I stammered and grew red as I answered that I did not think we had.

He looked round at me. It was the first time he had really looked at me since we met, and said quite kindly, as though he were talking to a very little child, "Do you know how to read?"

His question made me grow redder than ever. I was nine years old then; I had been able to read for the last four years, and I told him so with a little indignation piercing through my cautiously whispered tones. I was glad at all events to let him know that I was not so great an ignoramus as he thought.

"You did not seem to know the books of the house," he said, "and I want to find out if that is a real black-bird or a ring-ousel. But it is rather early in the year for a ring-ousel to be hatching."

He made way for me as he spoke, and I planted my elbows down beside his on the window-sill. The window was narrow, so there was but just room for us both, and we remained thus wedged tightly, shoulder to shoulder, while we continued our whispered con-

versation. Under the strangely alert gentle eyes of the blackbird our intimacy grew fast. I told Hector many things about Salaret. I pointed out to him the budding woods down in the hollow, and told him of the numbers of birds he would find down there. I told him of the great wood-pigeon hunts held up in the hills at the time of passage; of how we caught ortolans after the corn harvest; of everything that I thought would interest him; but at last, when I was telling him how the woodpeckers eat the whole shutter of one of our windows, he suddenly interrupted me to know if we had any gold-crested wrens.

He used the Latin name, and by this time I was no longer afraid of him; so I laughed, and said quite saucily that I did not understand Latin.

"And it seems that I do not speak French," he said, "for I don't know the French name. What are we going to do in order to arrive at understanding each other?"

We looked at one another and laughed, and then I saw what a merry face he had.

"Come downstairs to my grandfather," he said; "he knows everything, and he'll tell us the French name."

It was the first time I had thought of the grown-up people, and all my shyness returned as I followed Hector downstairs.

But Hector did not apparently know what shyness meant. He walked straight into the drawing-room, which seemed to be full of the silks and laces of two very grand ladies; and profiting by a pause in the conversation, asked something in English of an old gentleman who sat on the sofa beside Grandmère. But, instead of answering his question, the gentleman asked him in return where he had been and what he had been doing; and all eyes turned then to me.

"Ah," Grandmère said, good-naturedly, taking Hector's two strong white hands in hers, "you have been making friends with Zélie, I see. Children," she added, to Hector's grandfather, "are best left to themselves to become acquainted. In the age of growth new friendships are quickly made. That is nature, and we can do little to make or mar it. For the rest Zélie wishes so much to have a companion of her own age, that had he been ugly as Satan she would always have found him more beautiful than an old grandmother who has had the time to forget that she ever was a child."

Grandmère looked at me so kindly as she spoke that I forgot the strangers who were there, and in spite of my shyness I threw my arms round her neck and whispered:

"However much I love him, you are always Grandmère." I think that pleased Grandmère, for she liked

to know that I loved her. But Hector was looking puzzled.

"Zélie," he said. "What's Zélie?"

Grandmère and I both laughed at his bewildered expression.

"Oh! We don't know that yet," said Grandmère, with a sarcastic note in her voice. "This is Zélie," and she laid her hand upon my shoulder.

Instantly Hector turned towards me a face which made my heart beat for pleasure, the beaming face of recognition one turns to a friend.

"You!" he exclaimed, "are you Zélie? Of course, yes, of course; I had forgotten there was to be a little girl."

"You had forgotten there was to be a little girl?" repeated Grandmère. "And for what did you take her then during the hour you have passed together?"

Hector looked at me. Then his face wrinkled into laughter, and he replied with twinkling eyes:

"For a bird book, I think, madame."

"And a bad one, too," I murmured, with his speech about girls knowing nothing much rankling a little in my memory. Every one laughed at his bit of impudence, and Grandmère said, "Allons, she had better prove her love to you by giving you something to eat. It is the part women play towards men like you. Take him away, Zélie, and give him some goûter. It is

probable that he likes nuts and jam even better than you like them yourself."

I had prepared a goûter for Hector before he came. I asked him now if he would like to have it out of doors, and as he said he would, we were soon seated under a fig-tree at the corner, enjoying our little picnic. That is to say, I enjoyed it. I don't know whether Hector did in anything like the same degree. To have a companion at last, and to know that he was not going away; to think that to-morrow I should wake up to find him still in the house, and that the next day, and the next day, and the next, he would still be there to share my life; that when the fruit was ripe he would be there to pick it with me; that when the hay was cut we should play in it together; that when the maize was reaped he would work with me at the winnowing; that we should rejoice together when the time came to cut the grapes; that when *Sœur Amélie* gave us lessons, he would learn them by my side—to know, in fact, that life was never going to be lonely any more—filled me with a delight almost greater than I could contain. The food we were eating seemed to me to taste nicer than it had ever tasted before; but I scarcely cared to eat for the pleasure of watching Hector, and trying to slip the best pieces on his plate. He did not seem to notice much what he was eating, or what I was doing, but lay on his side

with one leg curled round the other and one elbow planted on the ground, and gazed about him in silent interest. From time to time he asked me a question which I answered to the best of my ability, but he did not seem to wish to talk, and I was well content to be silent. His face was like an animated conversation all the time, it was so full of energy and sympathy; and in watching it I became interested to a degree which left us both unaware of how little we talked.

I sat facing the house; he lay opposite to me, looking down over the lane and the vineyards beyond. Presently I saw the corners of his mouth go up and his eyes light with laughter.

"What are you laughing at?" I asked.

"At the face which is coming up the path; it's exactly like an india-rubber cracker in a cornette. Look!"

I looked round to see to my horror Sœur Amélie, whom I had always been taught to reverence as a saint, and whom I considered as far above the shafts of criticism as M. le Curé or Grandmère herself; and to make matters worse the truth of Hector's observation forced itself upon me the instant my eyes fell on her. Her face was like the india-rubber face of a cracker. It was very small and very wrinkled, the tiny mouth and nose and chin almost disappearing in rather overhanging cheeks. Cheeks, lips, and all

were yellow like old ivory ; the little pale blue eyes were unshaded by any eyebrows ; and swathed as the face was in the white bands of her coif, it looked, I confess, so little human that I could hardly help laughing myself at Hector's naughty comparison.

I had hardly had time to tell him that he must not laugh at her, that she was very good, and that she taught us our lessons to help to build a chapel for the sisters at Baigtz, before she reached the place where we were sitting.

She kissed me as usual, on both cheeks, and while my head was in her cornette I almost prayed that she might not kiss Hector. I knew by instinct that he would not like it. But she did. She makes a rule of kissing every one who is connected, however distantly, with the family ; and Hector bore it very well. He came out from under her cornette a little red, and his hair ruffled by the mistake he had made of trying to kiss the wrong side of her face, for which he had received a blow from the front of the cornette going in the opposite direction ; but he made no sign of objecting to the salute. If she had let him alone then all might yet have been well.

She began to ask him questions.

That was her way of making conversation, and she meant to be very kind, only in Hector's case it turned out badly.

Her first question was harmless enough :

"Have you ever seen a sister of charity before, dressed like this ?"

"No, madame."

"Ah ! my costume astonishes you, perhaps ; but you must not think that we are scarecrows, we sisters of charity. We are only poor weak women who have devoted ourselves to good works. We serve the good God and pray to"—Sœur Amélie said all this in a tone of the utmost good-humour, but here she suddenly stopped and asked somewhat seriously : "But perhaps you do not love our Holy Church ?"

Hector made no answer, and she repeated, "Your mother was a holy woman, have you been brought up in our religion ?"

Hector looked as though he did not know what the religion of sisters of charity might be.

"I don't exactly know," he answered, slowly.

"In the Catholic religion," she explained. "Are you Catholic or Protestant ?"

And he, standing politely hat in hand : "I think we had better ask my grandfather, madame. My aunts talk to me a great deal about religion, but I never thought of asking them the name of their religion. Grandpapa will know."

I think Sœur Amélie was too much astonished to

be able to continue the conversation, for she changed it suddenly, saying in a cheerful voice :

"And are you very glad to be here, my poor child, with the little cousin who loves you ?"

And he, still standing with head uncovered :

"I don't know yet, madame. I have only just arrived."

"How, you don't know? They have taught you already, at your age, to do without affection?"

This in a tone of the deepest commiseration.

Hector looked puzzled, and not knowing what to say he tried to smile. I understood directly that Sœur Amélie was thinking of him as the unfortunate orphan cast out from a cold-hearted family, and I was sure from the two or three minutes I had been in the drawing-room that Hector's grandfather at least loved him.

But I had too great a respect for Sœur Amélie to say anything then, and she continued, in a tone of curiosity :

"It is nothing to you that your little cousin loves you?"

"She cannot love me yet, madame," with a smile no longer puzzled but amused.

"Ah, you do not understand that. You do not love her, then?"

He made no answer, but stooped to brush some

twigs from his clothes. I cast an imploring glance at Sœur Amélie, but she did not see it: she was intent upon Hector.

"Say, then! You do not love her?"

An embarrassed pause, then Hector answered firmly: "No, madame;" not adding a word of explanation, but reddening a little with discomfort at having to make the impolite speech. I felt for him with all my heart.

"Oh! ma Sœur," I exclaimed; "how can he love me yet, when he has only known me for an hour?"

But she, who was nodding her head slowly up and down as over a reprobate, replied with sudden animation:

"Nevertheless, you love him—You."

It was quite true, and I was silenced, but not for that one bit convinced that Hector was hard-hearted. It was natural that I should love him—I had so few people to love. I had heard so much about him, and then he was to be the companion for whom I had longed. Whereas there was no reason for him to love me, he knew nothing at all about me; and I liked him only the better for telling the truth.

"Do you like France?" was Sœur Amélie's next question, and I found myself almost trembling for Hector, lest he should not like France, and be obliged to answer, No, to this question also. If he did I knew

Sœur Amélie would be mortally offended, for she thought France the most beautiful country in the world, and our Chalosse the most beautiful part of France. She prided herself specially upon this, because it was her birthplace ; and she had good ground, she always told us, for her opinion, having in her youth seen other countries and having never seen any to compare with the chalosse. I never knew what other countries she had seen ; when I asked her, she used to say that they were far away—too far for me to know anything about ; but every one round Salaret said that she had travelled, and we were all proud that she should still hold so good an opinion of our country. No one in the village would have dared in her presence to make a disparaging remark.

Fortunately, Hector did like France, and he answered brightly, stretching his arm out towards the fields :

“Yes, I like France, and I like that ; it is a thousand times prettier than London. In London we have only houses and streets and parks and people everywhere. It is much cleverer, you know ; but I like the country.”

“Ah, you prefer the country ! And why so, if there is more cleverness in London ?” Sœur Amélie was evidently a little piqued at the implied imputation on country wits, and her voice took a sarcastic tone.

But Hector did not notice it, and answered quite innocently, "Oh, it is the people of course who are much cleverer in London ; and I don't like people—in the country you can be alone."

His eyes fixed absently as he spoke on the horizon. He seemed to fancy himself alone already in the distant fields, and while Sœur Amélie raised her hands, murmuring in despair: "But those instincts are the instincts of a savage"—the song of a rising skylark caught his ear, and he evidently did not hear what she said for pleasure in listening to the bird.

There was no time for further conversation between them, for a moment later Grandmère appeared at the house-door accompanied by Hector's relations, and Hector was called to say good-bye.

I did not fancy Hector cared much for his aunts, though they seemed to speak kindly to him and kissed him affectionately before they got into the carriage. But I was more than ever certain, when I witnessed the parting between him and his grandfather, that he and the old man loved each other. The grey head bent down till it almost touched Hector's bright golden hair. Hector's vigorous young arms were thrown round his grandfather's neck for one hearty hug, and if it hadn't been for all Grandmère and Madelon said about the English never showing their

feelings, I could have fancied that the eyes of both were moist. That, however, was only for a moment. The next they were saying something very cheerful to each other in English, which of course I did not understand. The old gentleman pulled some money out of his pocket, which he gave to Hector, then he got into the carriage: the footman banged the door; and a few moments later the only sign of their presence was our little Hector whom they had left behind.

"Well, little lad," said Grandmère, putting her hand upon his head, "you'll be very unhappy for a while, but you must not be discouraged for that; you will become accustomed to us. Here is the little one all ready to adore you. As for me, I loved your mother, and her son at all events is at home here."

Then Grandmère and Sœur Amélie went in together. We heard the buzz of their talk for a long time through the window, and later, when I left Hector for a moment to go and get the key of the corn-bin from Grandmère for the fowls' supper, I heard Grandmère say in reply to some criticism or Sœur Amélie's:

"Ah bah! he has a good face and a vigorous little body, and if he has his little individuality, let him keep it. You are a saint, and you would like to

see us all conform to certain rules. I am only a simple country-woman, who has never stirred off her own land; but I go by what I see, and in my experience it is the individuals who achieve something, not the men whom Nature turns out like buttons by the gross."

CHAPTER III.

I WOKE next morning with the joyous thought that I had to show Hector our house ; and I knew enough of him now to feel sure that he would like it. I slept in a little room inside Grandmère's, and at five o'clock in the summer mornings Grandmère used to open her windows and mine. At half-past five she used to dress, and before she went down, if I was not awake she used to wake me, and pour the cold water into my basin for me to wash. It was not summer yet, and the early morning hours were fresh and dark, so that though Grandmère liked to be up herself, she used to let me lie in bed till half-past six. But this morning I had no desire to lie in bed. I was up and dressed before half-past six ; and when I found Grandmère in the kitchen blowing the red embers under a saucepan of steaming milk, my inquiry whether Hector was to be called met with the answer I had hoped for.

" Yes, yes ; go and wake him up."

I ran upstairs eager to see him again, but when after knocking twice I softly opened his door, I saw only the bedclothes thrown back from the empty bed, and a little night-shirt lying on the floor: Hector himself was gone.

"Well," grumbled Madelon, when I returned to the kitchen, "up to what time would you like him to stay in bed? I called him at five o'clock. I don't suppose he is to be more coddled than you. He seemed to like his bed, *allez*. He was well wrapped up in your new quilt."

"It is a good bed, I sorted all the feathers of it myself," said Grandmère. "It was perhaps a little hard for the beginning, Madelon, to bring him out of it so early."

"Bah; he has a firm body. He can bear some hardships," said Madelon; and I without any more words slipped away to try and find Hector.

He was nowhere in the house. I could not find him in the garden or the farmyard, and after awhile I set off to seek for him down the lane. I had not far to go, for at the forge I found him watching the smith light his fire, and chatting at the door with a girl from one of the *métairies*, who was on her way up to fetch the milk.

He seemed to have known her all his life, he had so much to say to her; and when I came up I found

he was telling her about the furnaces he had seen in a great arsenal somewhere in England.

I liked to hear about it, and the smith came to listen too when he had finished lighting his fire.

"Ha, it is interesting that ; the little lad knows how to speak," he said, as Hector went on to describe the wonders of the great arsenal.

"That's what people' achieve by joining together. Now, here am I with good strong arms." He rolled his shirt-sleeves higher as he spoke, and looked down with pride on his well-developed muscles. "Yes, and delicate fingers too, for all that regards smith's work. And there is Esquebesse the keeper, with head enough for four. He lends me his ideas, he explains to me what he wants. I lend him my hands, I do for him what he explains, and crack ! a machine is made. He snares his foxes and his weasels. I send my little bill to M. le Comte. The partridges thrive. I have a few francs to rattle in my pocket, every one is satisfied ; and there we are friends, M. le Comte and Esquebesse and I."

Esquebesse had come up the road with his dogs while the blacksmith was talking, and it was to him that the latter part of the speech was addressed. They were a contrast to each other, those two men. Esquebesse fair and slight, with shoulders stooping a little forward under his weather-stained brown velveteen

jacket; Pierre, short and black and square, with knotted muscles standing out on his bare arms and throat, and a brawny chest exposed by the loose shirt he always wore. And yet they were the greatest friends. It was well known that Esquebesse seldom failed to look in at the forge twice and three times a week, and Pierre used to walk over from Marie les Bains as regularly as Sunday came round to smoke a pipe with Esquebesse in his lodge, at M. le Comte's gate.

Esquebesse smiled in his quiet way at Pierre's notion of admitting M. le Comte as a third into their friendship.

"You're right, Pierre," he said, "those who don't serve one another are apt to hate each other, and hatred is useless friction; it is as bad for the country as rust for the machine. If there is anything which will hinder our old France from working now, it is the hatred of classes."

"Là bas, in your arsenal they kept their machines bright?" asked Pierre.

"Oh yes," said Hector, "they couldn't have any rust there," and he began to describe the workshops, full of flashing steel and whirring leather-bands, wheels going round, pistons working up and down, men and boys, hot, dirty, concentrated upon their work, feeding the powerful, precise, indifferent machines with the materials which passed through them from one stage to another of perfection.

"That's fine, that," said Pierre, nodding at Esquebesse. "And yet to say that it takes all that to maintain an army."

"Oh, he's a famous monster, the army, and eats easily not only all that, but all the best blood of a nation into the bargain. In this country," Esquebesse said with a smile to Hector, "we keep a pet dragon who gobbles up all our young men. We regret them it is true, but then he swells himself out and we are proud of the size of our dragon. We pat his sides perpetually, and from time to time we make him take a great breath that we may see how big he is."

"And when he has arrived at maturity we use him to eat up the dragons of other nations, or too unhappily, to be eaten up himself; and it is very fine that," said a new voice, somewhat bitterly, behind Esquebesse.

It was young Georges of the farm of St. Loubouët, dressed in his soldier's uniform, and so much improved in appearance since he went away more than three years before to be a soldier, that I scarcely recognized him.

But Irma recognized him well enough, for she blushed very red under her capeline, and said at once, just as though we did not all know now why she had been dawdling at the forge that morning:

"Allons, good day, M. Esquebesse, I must be going on to fetch my milk."

Everyone knew round Salaret that Georges was Irma's lover. His father held a little farm just on the other side of Grandmère's estate to the farm held by Irma's father, and there was only Georges and his sister to divide the inheritance. Irma was one of a big family. Georges had made love to her all his life, and though there was no engagement between them, her parents had been glad to promise that if Georges came back of the same mind after he had served his time with the army, they would give their consent to an engagement then.

Some said now that the parents were sorry they had given any promise, for Irma was very young at that time, and she had grown up since so pretty that she might have been married many times over. But she had no wish herself to marry any one but Georges. She said she would rather wait for him.

I had often heard Sœur Amélie and Grandmère talking about it, and I had never seen any lovers together in my life before, so I looked with all my eyes as Irma moved across the road with her white woollen capeline falling back and her curly dark hair shining in the sun, and Georges said something to her in a low voice which brought the colour suddenly back to her open countenance.

"There are two," said Esquebesse with a smile, "who think like you, Pierre, that union is strength."

"Ah! I would be glad to see that union. He comes back, poor lad, because he has heard rumours at Montfort, and he is uneasy. But he has no need, allez; she is safe, that one. I have known her from the cradle, and it is not every woman that I would have encouraged the boy to stake his happiness upon."

"But they say the other is rich, and that he is in love, the great idiot. And the parents would sell their souls for a thousand francs apiece."

"Ah bah! union is strength, and I will wager that for all her air of reserve, those two will find means of laying their heads together before he goes back to his regiment to-morrow."

"Those two" were separating now, and Irma called to us, "You are coming, children?" So we heard no more, but trotted up the lane with her, leaving Georges behind in chat with his uncle the blacksmith.

In the kitchen, Grandmère was beginning to wonder what had become of us, but the milk was only just ready. As we appeared in the doorway, Grandmère set the big saucepan on the plate which awaited it at one end of the kitchen-table, and while Madelon served Irma with the fresh milk she had come to fetch, Grandmère cut us each a great slice of corn bread, and filled our bowls with the hot yellow milk. When there were visitors at Salaret we always had coffee. No one

knew how to make it better than Grandmère ; but when we were alone Grandmère neither took it herself nor gave it to any of us. Hot milk and corn bread were good enough, she said, for country folk ; and Madelon and Jean had their breakfast from the same loaf and saucepan that furnished ours.

I was afraid Hector might not like such simple fare, but he broke his bread into his milk just as I did mine, and ate it as though he had never eaten anything else all his life. The only part of our breakfast which he seemed to notice was the pleasure of being allowed to sit and eat it on the doorstep looking out over the farmyard where the cocks and hens were already picking up their breakfast, and the wet straw glistened in the light of the newly risen sun. I always ate my breakfast on the doorstep in the summer, and Hector thought as I did that the bread and milk tasted much nicer there than in the smoky kitchen.

"Ah ! how hungry I am," he said as he put his bowl back empty on the table.

"You are hungry," said Grandmère ; "then begin again and let us see what effect that will have." Which he did, to his own great satisfaction and Grandmère's.

"Madelon, you were right to wake him up at five o'clock," she said.

"As if I didn't know it," replied Madelon. "That's not the body of a sluggard." And by that I understood that in spite of her sharp ways Madelon was going to love him too.

Grandmère liked no one to be idle, and after breakfast I always helped a little in the housework ; so I presently lost sight of Hector, and when Sœur Amélie came at nine o'clock, he was not at first to be found.

"I am not astonished," she said to Grandmère. "I greatly fear that it is a little savage whom they have sent you ; and we shall have much difficulty in instructing him in anything good."

"Go and look for him, Zélie, go and look for him," was Grandmère's only answer. "And don't come back to say you can't find him. It is ridiculous in this little house."

It occurred to me after awhile to look in the drawing-room—a room we never entered ourselves unless we had visitors—and there, at last, I found him. He had opened one of the shutters, and the light thus admitted fell upon an old bookcase, at the foot of which he sat upon the floor reading so intently that he did not notice my entrance.

"Sœur Amélie is here, Hector," I said. "Will you come?"

He paid no attention, but as I knew he must have heard me, I contented myself with looking over his

shoulder while I waited. The book seemed to me very stupid. It was a shabby little volume bound in worm-eaten leather, and the yellow pages were stained with damp. I could not understand what Hector was reading about; it was apparently a machine, and the title written at the top of the page, 'Avicéptologie Française,' left me as much as ever in the dark. I did not know what Avicéptologie meant, and I soon grew impatient.

"Hector, Sœur Amélie does not like to be kept waiting. Will you come?"

"Eh, what! What do you say? Sœur Amélie? Look here, Zélie. Didn't you say yesterday that there were plenty of woodpeckers about here?"

"Yes, lots; we will go out in the woods after dinner, but come along with me now. And, Hector, you mustn't open the drawing-room shutters again without Grandmère's leave; the sun spoils the furniture."

"And larks, Zélie? Didn't you say there were larks too?"

"Yes."

"Well, look here. Do you think we could find a peach-stone, or an old leg of mutton bone anywhere?"

"Hector!" I exclaimed, in imploring tones, "be good! I dare say we shall have stewed peaches for dinner to-day, because it is Friday, and then you can

have a stone. But come now, Sœur Amélie will be so vexed if you delay."

"Sœur Amélie! Eh, why! Is she here? What does she want? Of course I'll go. Where is she?"

It was the first time in my life that I had ever been late for lessons. My books stood on a little shelf in the dining-room, and when I saw Sœur Amélie's corsette coming up the lane, it had always been my habit to run and set chairs for her and me, and put my books upon the table. I never missed her, for from our door we could see a long way over the country, and her white headdress was so conspicuous in the morning sun, that one of us was sure to note her coming on the high road long before she turned into our lane.

I was therefore already fluttered this morning when lessons began, and soon I found that the interest I took in Hector's proceedings was stronger than my best resolutions. I could concentrate my mind on no work of my own. Sœur Amélie wished to find out what Hector knew. Could he read?

"Yes, a little."

"Could he write?"

"Very badly."

"Did he like arithmetic?"

"No, he hated it."

"Was he good at geography?"

"He had never learnt any."

"Had he studied well *L'Histoire Sainte*?"

"He had never heard the phrase before, and did not know what it meant; but he supposed all history was holy because it was the account of the world growing better, and made you see how, in spite of tyrants, it was worth while to be good."

He had been answering listlessly before; his face flashed now into interest, and he was going to say more when *Sœur Amélie* interrupted him:

"It is evident that you understand little of the true tendencies of history, and what I am asking you about now is Scripture history. You have heard the Bible spoken of, no doubt. Well, the Bible is not a book to put into the hands of children, but all that is necessary for them to know is told in *L'Histoire Sainte*, in a purified language, which presents no stumbling-blocks to the understanding. If you have never studied it, we must begin at once, for you have at your age much lost time to repair. With politics and worldly history we need not concern ourselves."

"How funny! Yes, I suppose it wasn't called politics in those days when the Israelites asked for a king, and were told that they ought not to want one."

Sœur Amélie looked surprised, and I thought a little annoyed. "I don't know where you have picked

up your information," she said, "but you have understood badly; such a thing never happened, the good God has been always on the side of kings; it is only the irreligious who disregard their divine right, and would do away if they could with everything that is divine."

Hector did not seem to think she was in earnest, for he laughed good-humouredly, and then saying, "It is quite clear, I'll show it to you; I remember exactly where it is;" he disappeared suddenly from the room. He returned almost immediately, with a small closely-printed book in his hand. "There it is, you see; just read that bit, about the great wickedness they did in the sight of the Lord in asking for themselves a king."

"It is in English," Sœur Amélie said, putting the book from her with an air of reproof, "and I don't read English."

"Oh, well, may Zélie run and fetch a French Bible, and I'll show it to you in that. They are very nearly the same, I have often compared them."

"What? What do you say? Is that a Bible?" exclaimed Sœur Amélie, suddenly taking up the book with interest. "And you have read it?"

"Yes, I have only read it all through once, but I am going through it again now, and of course I know a good many of the Psalms by heart, and parts of the Gospels and Epistles, and a good many chapters out

of Isaiah and Jeremiah, and some of Deuteronomy and Leviticus. I used not to care a bit for Deuteronomy and Leviticus till Grandpapa taught me Egyptian and Babylonian history ; and then it became so interesting, you know, to trace the effects of the Egyptians on the Jews, and of the Jews again upon the Babylonians, that I learnt a good many of the Jewish laws by heart. Have you ever read the Apocrypha ? That's very interesting too."

Sœur Amélie looked at him while he made this unusually long speech, just as she might have looked at some curious animal in the Jardin des Plantes. She was too much astonished to interrupt him, but as he ended her indignation broke forth :

"No, indeed, at my age even I have never permitted myself to read it ; and while you are here, Hector, you shall not read it either. It is an unheard-of presumption for a child like you to venture to read words, which are often more than the very wisest can understand. You are perhaps too young to know, my poor child, what dangers you have run, but here we will protect you against the snares of the evil one. I will take this book and put it in a place of safety ; whenever you return to England it shall be given to you again. If, as we all hope, that time may be far distant, your mind will be perhaps better prepared to receive its mysteries."

She said the last words very kindly, and crossed herself with fervour as she slipped the book into her pocket.

Hector did not attempt to rescue his book, but stood and gazed at her for a moment with a puzzled expression in his eyes.

"What did you say your religion was?" he asked as he sat down again quietly in his place beside me.

"The Catholic religion," she replied.

"Oh! then my aunts must be Protestants."

On this first day Sœur Amélie seemed to think it would be well to examine him no further, and after his display of unexpected knowledge she gave him a piece of geography and Histoire Sainte to learn by heart, and turned her attention to me.

I suppose I was very trying that morning, for I could not think of anything but Hector; and Sœur Amélie was more irritable than I had ever known her. Lessons ended for me in tears, for Hector in nothing at all, for when Sœur Amélie turned to him at the last moment to hear his repetition he did not know one word of the lessons she had set him. He had been thinking of something else, probably, the whole time. He wrinkled his brow, and looked vainly round the room for inspiration. Nothing came; Sœur Amélie sat and waited with the book in her hand. On his side only the blankest silence.



"SŒUR AMÉLIE SAT AND WAITED WITH THE BOOK IN HER HAND."



At last she threw the book down in vexation. "I should not have wished to give punishments on Hector's first day," she said, "but that sum that Zélie is crying over must be done and these lessons learnt before I come to-morrow. We shall not advance much, Hector, if this is the way you work."

Madelon's shrill voice from the kitchen—"Hé ! ma Sœur, Pierre is harnessing. Make haste !" cut short any more of the reproaches she might with justice have addressed to us, for Pierre the blacksmith used always to give her a lift back to the convent as he drove into St. Marie les Bains to dine with his old mother, and she could not keep him waiting at the corner of the lane. "Allons, don't cry, Zélie ; do your sum now at once before dinner, and be better children to-morrow." She kissed us then both before she went, and a minute after we saw the wings of her cornette flapping as she ran down the lane in the sun.

I thought Hector would have said something about her taking his book and being disagreeable ; and I meant to defend her, because, though she was a little cross sometimes, she was always kind at heart, and I felt ashamed now she was gone of having been so silly and naughty.

But the instant she was out of the room Hector seemed to forget all about her, and his first question was,—

"Do you really think we shall have stewed peaches for dinner, Zélie? It isn't the time of year for peaches now, is it?"

"No, but Grandmère puts them away in tins when they are plentiful, and we often do have them on Fridays. Are you very fond of peaches?" I asked, wondering a little at what seemed like greediness.

"I don't mind about the peaches one way or the other, but I want the stones. You see this man says," and he put up on the table the little brown book he had been reading in the morning, "that, with a peach stone properly cleaned out, and filed and pierced at both sides, you can make a call perfectly resembling the cries of larks. Of course I can make one with a mutton-bone and a little wax, but I think the peach-stone would be the nicest and the easiest too. And look here, Zélie, I have been drawing on my slate all the figures I could remember of the implements a bird-catcher needs. Just you take the book now, and see if I describe them rightly."

His slate was covered with little pictures of knives, bill-hooks, awls, odd sorts of whistles, things that looked like quivers full of arrows, and various other tools which had no meaning at all for me, till I saw that in the book he had put into my hands there was a number of old plates which corresponded with his drawings, and were accompanied by full and minute descriptions of the

construction and uses of the implements they represented. Then he began to describe to me how the things were made, and what they were for, while I kept the book open to see if he remembered rightly. He explained to me that the word *Avicéptologie* meant the science of catching birds, and even in the short time he had had for reading, he had found out so much about the habits of our native birds, and the way to call them and the way to catch them, and how to make the different tools he needed, that I was quite fascinated by hearing him repeat it all; and we were both still leaning over his slate when Madelon came in to set the table for dinner.

"Ha, we are beginning to love our lessons, are we?" she remarked, with a sharp glance at the disorder of the table. "Formerly the table used to be clear when I came to set the places. It is very good to be studious, but it is good also not to neglect our common duties."

I blushed to think how little I merited the praise bestowed upon my diligence. My sum was still unfinished, Hector's lessons were unlearned; but we had to put our books away, for Madelon's movements were very prompt, and a few moments later the steaming soup-tureen set down before Grandmère's place, served as a signal that dinner was ready.

CHAPTER IV.

H ECTOR got his peach-stones at dinner, but after dinner Grandmère sent us to wipe apples up in the fruit-loft, so we did not immediately put them to any use. Grandmère told us that we might have the two best apples we could find in each shelf we wiped, and as the shelves were large, and we were both fond of apples, we worked for a long time up stairs. We had fairly earned at last three apples each, and were bringing them down in glee to eat with our goûter out of doors, when I perceived that the door leading to the granaries was open, and I took Hector in to show him the part of the house which I liked best of all. The dwelling-house at Salaret was built at one end of the farmyard, at the other end was the great storehouse for the wine and the room with the presses and wine tanks, all idle and dusty now, but full of life and activity in the autumn, when the sun had coaxed the bare brown vines into fruit; along one side of the yard, connecting the dwelling-house

with the wine-rooms, ran a succession of necessary outhouses, cowhouse, dairy, laundry, stables, wood-house, and above them, for the whole length of the yard, ran the granaries and hay-lofts. Grandmère was very proud of her granaries; and well she might be, for to this day, old as she is, she looks after her metayers so well, that there is hardly a landowner in the country who has finer harvests than she. She has only to look at a field and she knows within a bushel or two how much corn ought to come to her out of it; she knows how many quarts of wine to expect from every vineyard, and she insists upon full measure; yet she is so just, and in her own way generous, to the metayers that they never have cause for complaint. I think they respect her all the more because she will not allow them to cheat her, and they know she is never hard in cases of real distress. I have often known her, when there was occasion, give up her share of the produce from a poor métairie, and not only feed the family through the winter, but give them their seed corn in the spring. "When God is wielding the scourge," she used to say, "we must help each other to bear His blows with patience." No one who serves Grandmère would dare to bring her a nonsensical tale; but there is not one of her metayers who does not feel in his heart that he has a friend up at Salaret.

The granaries were not at their best on the day Hector first saw them, for we had sold a great deal of corn that winter. After the harvest they were always piled from floor to roof, leaving only a path for the labourers to pass up the middle. But Hector had never seen them like that, and he admired them to my heart's content just as they were. Men were at work in the middle room, giving out sacks through the shoot to load a bullock cart, which was drawn up in the yard below. In the first rooms as we entered there was no light but that which came from the tiled roof overhead, and the soft broken rays fell pleasantly on the different heaps of grain. The rye, the golden maize, the more sober-coloured wheat, the glistening oats, were all equally beautiful, in my eyes, and I pointed them out with pride to Hector. He had never seen anything at all like it before, he said, and his joy at jumping head foremost into the thrashed corn, at swinging in the thrashing machine, rolling on the silky yellow maize leaves we found piled in another room; burying me and himself in the white husks from which the grain had been beaten out, was a revelation of future delight to me. I had never done any of those things, because I had never had any one to do them with; but now I enjoyed it as much as Hector did, and our laughter rang from room to room. Grandmère came up to see how the

men were getting on with the lading, and when she saw my cheeks flushed and my hair full of bits of straw, instead of being vexed, as I was half afraid she might be, she patted my head and said: "That's right, Hector; give her some exercise and make a child of her again. She is so sober and staid, that I was beginning to think they had cheated me with a grandchild as old as myself."

Hector was likely, indeed, to give me plenty of exercise. He was tumbling head over heels down a heap of maize leaves, when all his peach-stones fell out of his pocket and rattled about the floor.

"But, yes, Zélie, I had forgotten! The wood-peckers!" he exclaimed, as he picked them up. "You promised to take me to the woods after dinner. And where are our apples? I think I must eat them now; I am so awfully hungry again."

This last was in rather a lower and somewhat apologetic tone; but Grandmère heard it from the room where she was busy.

"Go and get some goûter from Madelon," she called out. "And then you need not come up again. I shall be locking the doors in a minute or two."

I was hungry too, to-day, as I never used to be before Hector came, and we accepted most gratefully the bread and garlic Madelon gave us at the kitchen door. Then Hector proposed that we should take it

to eat in the woods where the woodpeckers were ; and staying our appetites as we went with an apple apiece, we started for our first walk together.

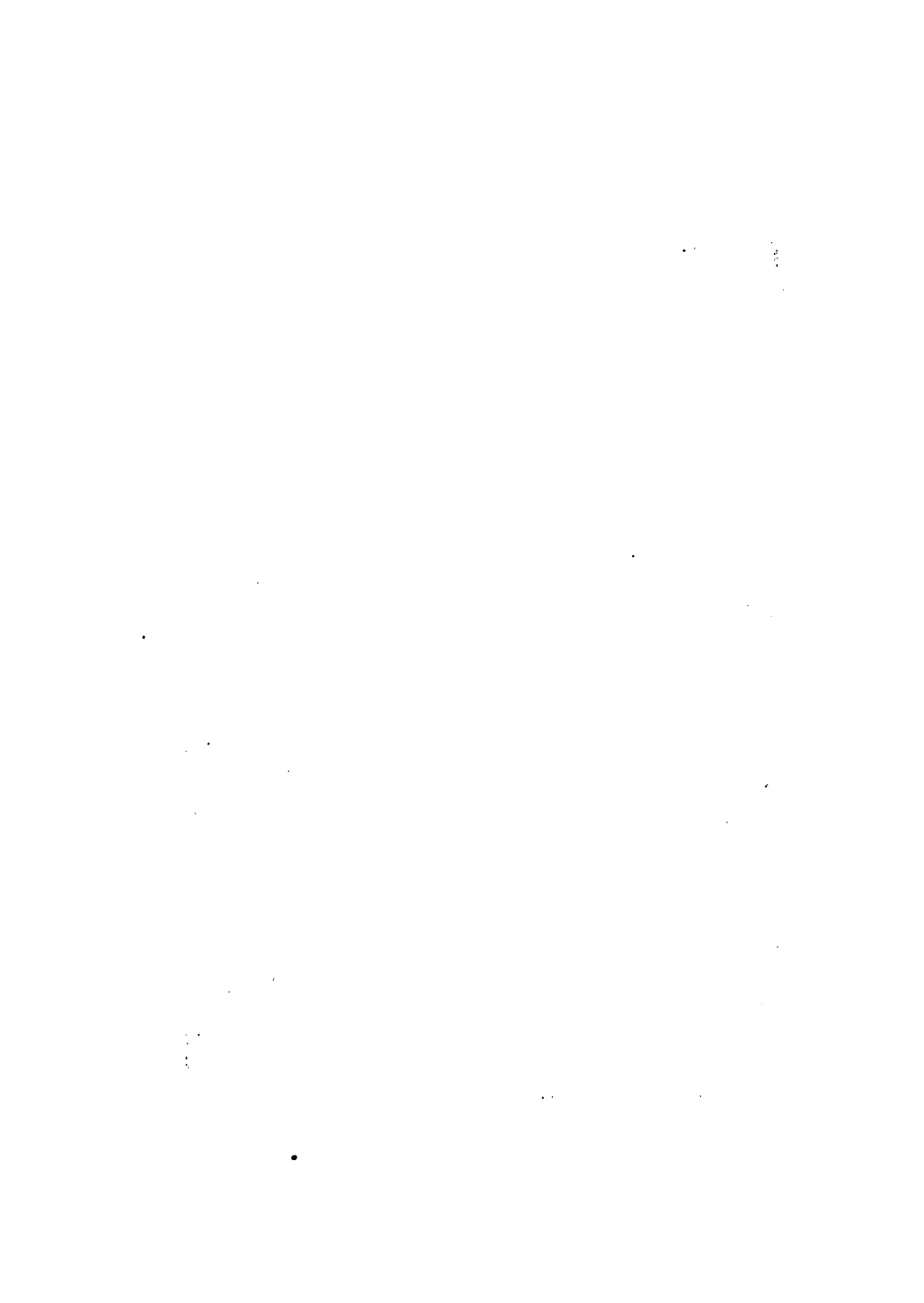
As we went down the lane, Hector pulled his peach-stones out of his pocket and began to explain to me how he intended to make his whistles ; but the operation turned out to be less simple than he had thought, for at the very beginning we were puzzled by the necessity for piercing them before we could get at the kernel to scrape it out. Hector was very anxious to make them at once, in order to try their effect down in the woods ; but it was only the more tantalising as we looked at the beautifully marked impenetrable shell to reflect how quickly and easily the nut inside could be disposed of if we once succeeded in making the holes we wanted. Hector had the book in his pocket, and produced it. There was a little engraving of the peach-stone as it ought to be pierced on both sides, with a hole about the size of a small lentil. There were instructions on the opposite page to pierce it, and scrape it out, and we were told that its goodness consisted in the clear full note it gave. But before that clear full note could be heard we had to find means of boring the crisp, close-grained wood.

"It's no use going any farther," Hector said, "till I try if the small blade of my knife will do it."

So we sat down on the mound at the bottom of the



"WE SAT DOWN ON THE MOUND AT THE BOTTOM OF THE LANE."
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lane, and our half-eaten apples rolled unheeded into the dust, while we concentrated all our energy and attention upon Hector's operation with the knife. But it was very slow and not satisfactory; sometimes the steel seemed to make no impression on the wood, sometimes chips of peach-stone broke off in unexpected places; and when I compared the jagged, untidy scraping with the neat holes in the picture, I felt sure that no clear full note would ever come out of our peach-stone.

Then at last, as I had been expecting all along, the knife slipped, and the stone Hector held was in an instant covered with blood from his left hand. I screamed in dismay, and without stopping his work, he looked up at me with a curious smile.

"What a regular little French girl you are," he said, "to scream at the sight of a little blood! What does it matter so long as we get the holes made?"

"I don't know what you mean," I replied, indignantly, "by a regular little French girl. French girls are not cowards only," and I found my voice quivering a little, though I did not want it to; "I thought you had hurt yourself."

"Go on with this," he said, "while I twist my handkerchief round the cut."

He put the knife and the blood-stained peach-stone into my hand. It made me feel sick to touch it, and

I suppose I was really in heart a coward, for my hands shook with the terror I felt lest the knife should slip again. But I would not have refused for all the world. I was determined he should not think through me that French girls were cowards. I grasped the peach-stone as tight as my trembling fingers would hold it, and with an inward prayer to St. Joseph to watch the knife, I began in my turn to scrape.

I was rewarded. I had no sooner begun than Hector very gently took the knife and peach-stone from me.

"That'll do," he said, "the knife might slip again, and I only wanted to see if you were really brave, or if you were boasting, like most girls. Perhaps I'd scream if you were cut; it is always worse seeing things done to other people." I laughed at the thought of him screaming, but I saw as I looked up that he had turned very pale.

"Does it hurt much?" I ventured anxiously, for the cut was a deep one.

"No, not a bit. It is only the sight of blood always makes me feel rather sick. That's why I go on looking at it. It is so silly to mind those things."

He had not, however, an opportunity for looking at it much longer, for Georges of Saint-Loubouët came out of the forge at that moment, and seeing the stained handkerchief which Hector had unwound again from

his hand, he came and asked us what was the matter. We explained what we had been trying to do, and he solved our difficulty for us in a minute.

"Bind up your hand," he said to Hector, "and come along in here. My uncle is the man you want."

"Blow your fire," he continued good-naturedly to his uncle as we passed into the forge, "I have brought you a big job now. Here are two children who want to pierce two peach-stones. They began cleverly enough by piercing themselves, but they forgot to swallow the peach-stones first, so they are obliged now to have recourse to you."

"Let us see—let us see," said Pierre, working his bellows. And in five minutes more Hector's peach-stones were all laid on the anvil, where a red-hot nail worked by a master hand soon made in them the holes we needed.

Georges left the forge as soon as he had put us in his uncle's hands, but Pierre listened good-naturedly to all Hector had to say about the uses to which he intended to put his peach-stones, and looked at the engraving in order to make our holes of the exact size.

"Tiens!" he said. "What one learns by being able to read. Read me a bit now that I may see how they say it in the book."

Hector read aloud as he was asked; and I wondered

what he meant by saying to Sœur Amélie that he could only read a little. He read beautifully, far, far better than I, and, I thought, than Sœur Amélie either.

"That's fine that!" said the smith; "Ah, Esquebesse is the man for you. He'd like to see that book too, and he'll tell you all about birds. He knows their haunts for twenty miles round. Good-day, M. Baptiste!"

The burly form of Baptiste the miller filled the doorway. He wanted his horse shod, and Pierre had to attend to him at once. He was one of Grandmère's well-to-do tenants. They said in the neighbourhood that, besides his mill, he had saved at least four hundred pounds, with which he had bought railway shares; and though his family had not held the mill for anything like the number of generations that Georges' family, for instance, had held the Saint-Loubouët farm, he was not a new-comer, and he was treated with consideration in the country. He was past forty now, but he was not married, and a single life seemed to agree with him. His round, red, fat face beamed prosperously above his blouse, and his comfortable proportions and well-kept clothes spoke of no stint or mismanagement at home. "They told me your nephew Georges was here," we heard him say as Pierre bent over the horse's hoof.

"He is out," Pierre answered shortly.



"Where has he gone?"

"As if I knew! Gone up to pay his respects to Madame Loustanoff very likely. He will be back with me at six o'clock."

This last was with a good-humoured, open air, but as he came into the forge to fetch some nails, Pierre said to us in a low quick voice, "You are going down to the woods over there?"

"Yes."

"Then, if you see Georges, tell him the miller is here inquiring for him. You won't forget?"

Without giving us time to answer he went back to the shoeing of the miller's horse, but though we did not understand why, we saw very well that he did not wish our mission to be mentioned before the miller. We therefore said no more about it as we followed him out of the forge. Only as we stood for a moment to watch the shoeing, Hector asked how much there was to pay for our peach-stones.

"How much money have you?" asked Pierre, laughing.

"I have plenty of money," said Hector, putting his hand in his pocket and pulling out three gold Napoleons, "but that hasn't anything to do, has it, with what you ought to make me pay?"

"It has generally a good deal to do with what I make my customers pay. But keep your money, my child, I don't want any."

"That is not the way to do business," said the miller, as he puffed his cigarette ; "I don't approve of those generosities—I don't say in this case. What you have done is no doubt a small thing, and then it is for Madame Loustanoff ; but, as a rule, those who can't pay for things should not want them, and you ruin yourself in working for paupers."

"I am not as rich as you, M. Baptiste, but I am rich enough ; and, be easy, I'll make you pay, at all events, for the work I do for you."

We all laughed at the fervour of Pierre's assurance, and Hector said :

"You'd better let me pay too, for I'm sure only to lose my money ; I nearly always do."

"Nonsense," said Pierre. "There's nothing for you to pay. But that's a lot of money for you to carry loose in your pocket. You ought to give it to some one to keep."

"Well, then," said Hector, "will you keep it for me ? Grandpapa gave it to me when he was going away, and I'm certain to lose it unless some one takes care of it."

"And what tells you that I am honest ?" asked Pierre. "You have only known me since this morning."

Hector paused a moment and considered deeply.

"I think it's because you seem to care more about other people than about yourself," he said then, "and

if you care more about them you can't want to take their things."

"And I know you are honest," I said, "because I have known you all my life."

"Allons, I'll take your money," said Pierre, "and keep it at all events till you come back this evening. It would be a pity to lose it down in those woods. And now be off; you haven't a moment to spare if you want to catch any birds before dark to-night."

CHAPTER V.

WE were soon down in the woods, and once there, the interest of eating our gôûter and of scraping out our peach-stones as a preliminary to producing the promised clear, full note which was to delude the larks, so absorbed us that we thought no more of Pierre or the miller, or the message given us for Georges. We did not find the kernels of the stones very easy to scrape out with a bent pin, which was the only instrument we possessed small enough to penetrate to the innermost corners of the nutshell; but with patience we succeeded at last, and then we sat on the stump of an old chestnut-tree and whistled till our cheeks ached with blowing and our sides with laughter. I need not say that our notes were not in the least like the notes of larks. If they were clear and full, that virtue was due to the healthy state of our own lungs and throats; the peach-stones counted for very little in the sounds which we produced. But when we had

laughed our fill, and I had grown tired of trying to whistle, Hector became serious, and pulling the "Avicceptologie" out of his pocket, applied himself in earnest to learn the lark-call. The book gave exact directions about the management of the breath and the manner in which the whistle should be held; and after a time, whilst I amused myself looking through the plates and asking questions which remained all unanswered, Hector, with reiterated endeavours, succeeded in drawing a note from the peach-stone itself.

His face flushed with pleasure. "It's not a good note, and it's not much like a lark's cry," he said, "but it is a note made with the peach-stone. Listen! when I whistle without the stone the sound is quite different."

It was true; and his perseverance had roused my listlessness into renewed interest. I did not attempt to produce the sound myself, but I made him try it again and again, till he was quite sure of it, and we were both of opinion that it really was growing clear and full.

"Now," he said, "the thing to do is to find out where some larks live, that we may come and listen to them every day and try to imitate their sounds. They might very likely be building now; the end of March and April is their time, and the young birds won't be out till May; so we should have good opportunities."

"How did you find out so much about birds, Hector?" I asked. "Did your grandfather teach you that too?"

"Hush! No. You can learn anything you like, when you know how to read. Don't chatter, I want to listen."

It was late now in the afternoon. The sun was so low that the shadows of the trees crossed each other in long-drawn perspective over the patches of shining white and mauve anemones and green tufts of daffodil spikes which broke the russet of last year's fallen leaves, and the wood was alive with the cries of little birds going to roost. Sweet and harsh, clear and muffled, low and shrill, they answered each other across the hollow, till we could have believed that every bud and branch had its voice and that the trees were singing in chorus.

In such a confused medley of sound, I could not have distinguished any special note with the least hope of following it up; but after listening attentively for a few moments, Hector made me a sign to follow him, and began to steal away on tiptoe over the leaves. At last, I too fancied I heard amongst the other sounds a low sweet note down in the hollow, which was repeated from time to time; and stopping occasionally to listen, we made our way down into the thicker part of the wood where the path wound through it to the

village. As we reached the place whence we thought the bird's song proceeded, the sound ceased; but Hector stopped by a spreading daphne-bush and whispered:

"It was a woodlark, and I'm sure it came from somewhere near here; but perhaps it won't sing while it sees us. Let us get under this bush and wait."

"Serpents!" I whispered in an agony as I saw him lifting the low boughs of the daphne; but his only answer as he slid underneath the glossy screen was an indifferent "Don't come."

He did not take the trouble to look at me, but I fancied the expression of his face the same as when he had called me "a regular little French girl;" and after a moment of desperate struggle with myself I stooped and whispered, "Is there room enough for me, Hector?"

"Plenty," he answered; and I wriggled in beside him.

"Plenty of room for you, and a few serpents too," he said. But this time he spoke kindly, and though I shook with fear I felt quite happy.

Finding that I remained unbitten, I became convinced after a few moments that we had intruded upon no serpent's nest, and as Hector curled himself round on one side of the daphne-stem, breaking off a few small branches to make room for his head, I followed

his example on the other side, till we were soon established in the greatest comfort like two little tailors under a tent. Hector had his peach-stone ready, and we listened in silence for the lark. We waited very patiently, but it did not sing again; and presently, instead of the notes of the lark, we heard the sound of steps approaching; and human voices, speaking low, came to us through the trees.

"Because, listen to me, Irma," a voice was saying, which we recognized directly as that of Georges. "It is that I have loved you so long I can't get over the habit now, and if you play me false, I must go away and begin a new life. I shall care no more for Saint-Loubouët, if all its fields are to remind me of you when you are married to some one else. If I cannot share my little comforts with you, it is no use to me that I am my father's only son. I shall only be sorry that he must be left childless and desolate in his old age; for you know me, Irma; you have known me since I was a little boy, and you know I am too fiery to live here if you marry any other man than me. It would be stronger than I. I will volunteer when my time is up for an African regiment, and perhaps out there, with the sea between us, I shall manage to forget you."

"But no, Georges," Irma said. "It will not be I who will send you over the sea."

"They're making love!" Hector whispered to me with excitement quite as great as my own; and without the least thought of our indiscretion, we put our two heads together and peeped through an opening in the daphne-leaves as silently and cautiously as if we had been watching the proceedings of the woodlark itself. They were walking down the path together. Irma had her distaff in her belt, and she was spinning as she went; but she did not seem to me to be thinking much of the evenness of her thread. Her cheeks were flushed, and her dark eyelashes wet with unusual tears. Georges' face was turned towards her. He seemed to be very much in earnest.

"I tell you all that, Irma," he said, "just that you may know. For when I was away at Montfort and I heard rumours, I lay awake thinking, and I thought it's a long time since she has seen me, and perhaps she thinks I am forgetting her, and that it will make no difference; and then I thought to myself, it is only fair to let her know the difference it will make; for I know you have a good heart, Irma, and you love my father, and you promised to be a daughter to him. Then, if you marry some one else, you rob him of both his children. And you who have known him all your life, you know it would break his heart for the land to go after him to some other than me. We have held that land of the Loustanoffs now, from father to

son, near four hundred years. I love the land too, Irma. It is there I was born; it is near there my mother is buried. I had always hoped to live there with you, and that the old man would see our little ones about him there before he died. And when I was lying awake thinking at Montfort, I thought, she has a good heart; she would not work this ruin if she knew the difference it would make. I can't impose upon you to make you think me better than I am, for you have known me all my life. I don't know how to speak well, Irma, and I know I am not much myself for you to be faithful to; but it is, do you see, that you promised the old man to be his daughter, and that it would make such a difference."

He stopped nearly opposite the daphne-bush, seeming to entreat an answer, and she put her hand out to him and said, as she looked up with the colour mounting in her cheeks:

"You are much to me, Georges. It is not because I have promised the old man, but because I have promised you yourself that I will be faithful to you."

Georges squeezed the little brown hand she gave him.

"Ah! Irma," he said, "if you knew the good it does me to hear you. You don't understand that, you, but when a man is far away and he lies there

thinking, and they have told him how all the men at home, cleverer and richer than he, are trying to get his sweetheart, and he thinks how he is stupid and plain, with nothing to recommend him, and that she is growing prettier and prettier every day,—then it is like a great sickness here to think she will not stick to him. And when I come home to find you remember still. Ah ! it makes a baby of me.” He dashed his hand across his eyes, and then they walked on again side by side.

The next thing we heard was Irma’s voice :

“ I only say to you what I say to every one. I will never marry any other man but you unless I am forced into it against my will.”

“ Unless you are forced into it ! How can they force you if you choose to say No ? ”

“ Ah ! Georges, you know we must obey our parents, and they make my life hard, allez, because I have waited for you. But they gave their promise themselves to wait till your time was up, and I will hold out till then.”

“ It will not be long now, only ten months more ; and I shall be here in the autumn with the soldiers.”

“ You will not fail, Georges ? ”

“ Fail ! how should I fail ? The whole of the 18th Corps will move, and the manœuvres are to extend over this very ground. It will be hard indeed if we

don't meet. Who knows but I may be quartered in your very house !”

“It is my father who will be pleased in that case. He who loves soldiers so much !” They both laughed aloud a merry, light-hearted laugh.

“It is all one,” said Georges, “I don't love them myself much more than he, and he will like me again when he sees you at St. Loubouët.”

“But, Georges, if you were kept at Montfort?”

“I shall not be kept at Montfort. My Colonel is kind to me; he knows that my home is here, and only yesterday he told me to tell my parents I should see them again in the autumn.”

“I know you are his orderly, and he favours you—your father told me that; but if he were to keep you with him at Montfort? It is that, Georges, I shall want you in the autumn. The busy season will be here soon, and there will be no more question of marriages now till the harvests are over; but I will speak frankly to you; you know how it is at the Saint-Martin. They ask my father, and it is not easy to say No when every one is against you. And then—and then they say you have your cousin at Montfort, and that you go to see her every Sunday; and they laugh at me to wait for a man who does not think of me. And I do not believe a word of it, but it vexes me to hear her spoken of so much.”

"Ha ! they tell you that, do they? Well, it is true that I spend part of every Sunday with my uncle, and I see Marie there when I go. But it is not true that I think once of her in the week between whiles, and if you like better, Irma, for me to stay in barracks on Sunday afternoons, I will stay in barracks."

"No, Georges, I am not so selfish ; and, besides, I trust you. But you will not fail me when the soldiers come."

"Listen, Irma !" They stood still again. Georges raised his head, and then we heard the woodlark's cry. "You know that call well. One day, when the soldiers are here, you will be spinning in the porch, and you will hear it three times, thus."

We listened, and heard the woodlark call its mate, as Georges said, three times before we fully understood. Then, as it dawned upon Hector that Georges was the lark we had been tracking, he shook so with suppressed chuckling, that I was afraid the rustling of the branches would betray our presence. I suppose, however, that Georges was thinking only of Irma, and Irma only of Georges, for they paid no attention though the daphne-leaves shook under their very eyes.

"And when you hear it," Georges continued, "you will come down spinning into the wood, where you will not be long alone."

My position under the daphne-bush was becom-

ing intolerably uncomfortable. In kneeling up to peep at the two lovers I had put myself into a strained attitude, which forced me to throw nearly all my weight upon a branch, on which my right hand rested. My arm and back were aching, my head was twisted, some twigs upon which I knelt were pressing most painfully into my knee. I felt that in another moment I must move, cost what it would, when suddenly the branch upon which I was leaning gave way, and crash through the lower twigs I went to the ground. Hector's hand griping my frock firmly at the waist, alone prevented me from rolling ignominiously out at the feet of Georges and Irma. Hurt as I was, I had the presence of mind to stifle the exclamation which rose to my lips, and while Georges and Irma, startled at the extraordinary and unexpected sound, looked, fortunately for us, in every direction but the right one first, Hector and I lay trembling, we scarcely knew whether most with laughter or most with fear, upon the ground.

Had they stayed five minutes longer they must have discovered us, but Irma was frightened by the noise ; and though Georges assured her it was but a squirrel, or perhaps a weasel chasing a rabbit through the bushes, she said that it was time for her to be going home. The sun was low, and her father would be angry if she were seen out in the dusk.

"But, Georges, listen no more to what they say at Montfort. I will wait for you, and, if anything should keep you in the autumn, you will write to your uncle, and he will let me know."

"I will not fail," said Georges. "I will write to my uncle Pierre, and as he cannot read, it is you whom he will ask to read his letter to him. I will arrange all that ; but he is sharp, l'oncle Pierre, he needs no telling."

They were walking away while they spoke, and now they turned a corner which took them out of our sight. In an instant Hector and I were out of our hiding-place.

"I would like to know how long he took to learn that lark-call," said Hector ; "let's see if it was like this." Hector made a call as he spoke upon his peach-stone ; but my mind was too full of Irma and Georges to listen.

"I wonder if Pierre's message had anything to do with *that*," I said, nodding my head after the two lovers, and full of importance at the thought that we were being used perhaps in such great matters.

"He said we were to be sure and not forget. Let us run across and give it to them before they get up on the high-road. They will never guess that we come from here."

CHAPTER VI.

A CIRCUIT through the woods brought us in a minute or two face to face with Georges and Irma. The consciousness of our knowledge caused us to blush guiltily as we delivered our message, but I could see by the effect it had upon them that we were right to have carried out Pierre's instructions. They both looked embarrassed, and when Irma said—"Then I won't go on with you, Georges," he made no attempt to persuade her.

I was so fascinated by my interest in these real living lovers, that I would have stood there open-mouthed to stare at them as long as they remained together, if Hector had not pulled my dress and walked on himself in leisurely fashion down the path.

"What were you staying there to look at them for?" he said. "They couldn't say good-bye while you were there."

"Why not?" I asked, innocently.

"Because Georges must go down on his knees to kiss her hand, or they must fall into each other's arms, or something like that ; lovers always do when they bid each other good-bye, and they couldn't, you know, while you stood staring at them."

"How do you know lovers always do that?"

"Oh, because I have read about them in the library at home, lots of them, and they always do. At least, I don't know though ; perhaps it is only gentlemen lovers. Sir Charles Grandison and the lovers I have read about are all gentlemen, and I don't believe Georges is such a fool."

This thought seemed rather to relieve Hector's mind, and he said, after a minute's reflection, "When I marry, I don't intend to marry a lady."

"Why not?"

"Because a girl like Irma is much better. Ladies scream and wring their fair white hands, and think it is grand to pretend they don't care about you a bit when you're making love to them. Now, Irma was nice and kind to Georges, and then she went on spinning all the time, and that's so much more useful. Ladies can read and write a little more than Irma, but they don't know anything much, and they can't do any work, and I don't see the good of having a wife unless she can be of some use to you."

"Hector," I said, as we approached the edge of the

wood, "what funny books you seem to have read—the Bible and love stories and Babylonian history." But my remarks on Hector's reading were cut short by the whining voice of a tramp whom I had noticed hanging about the forge when we were there.

"Could the little gentleman give him a sou?" he asked; he was hungry, and he had walked a long way.

Hector thrust his hand into his pocket, but pulled it out empty.

"I forgot," he said, "of course I gave all my money to the blacksmith to keep; what a pity. No, I have nothing for you."

"Yes, that's it. We have gold pieces for ourselves and nothing at all for the starving," replied the man, with sudden change of voice and an evil look. "You think, perhaps, that I am going to believe what you like to say to me, but I am not such a fool." As he spoke he suddenly approached and seized Hector by the collar. "Now then, what have you in the bottom of your pockets?"

Hector's answer was two swift blows, one after the other as fast and as hard as he could hit, straight up into the man's face. He was a great lusty fellow, about three times as big as Hector, and when I saw the wicked angry light that flashed into his eyes as he raised his stick, I was so terrified that the shriek I uttered must have been heard up at Salaret.

Down came the stick. If it had struck Hector as he intended, there would have been no need for another blow ; but Hector had slipped in some wonderful way between his legs. The force with which he had struck only served to make the man lose his balance, and before he had recovered himself, the hand of Pierre the blacksmith was on his collar, his stick had been wrested from him, and with all the strength and adroitness of a right arm accustomed to use the hammer, Pierre was belabouring him with blows. I could not bear to see it, even though the man had struck Hector. "Enough, Pierre," I implored, "enough, you will kill him !" But Pierre paid no attention to me, and I hid my face in my hands to shut out the horrible sight.

"Let me alone for hitting. I am not a blacksmith for nothing, and I know how to regulate my blows. He has had his lesson good, he'll remember it too, allez, for some time to come, but there's not a bone in his body broken. That'll teach you to come prowling in our woods, and to make attempts to rob children who can't defend themselves. I heard every word that passed, you villain ; and if ever I catch you off the high-road in Madame Loustanoff's land again, you will receive the like at my hands." Pierre's voice warned me that the chastisement was over, and I looked up to see the unfortunate beggar sitting on the ground

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while Pierre stood over him stick in hand, but as cool as if he had just beaten out a horse-shoe on his own anvil. Esquebesse had sauntered up with his two dogs, and was calmly smoking over the scene. Hector alone seemed as much moved as I; with a face as white as marble and eyes strangely bright, he stood with his hands in his pockets, gazing at Pierre. I could see that he had not missed one detail. The corners of his mouth were drooping, but if the face was as white, it was as firm as marble too. I wondered what he thought of it all. He did not speak.

"You hit hard, Pierre," said Esquebesse.

"I was right," said Pierre. "Empty your pockets!" The tramp obeyed without a word. I was surprised to see him so submissive. In one pocket, besides his knife, there was a heavy bundle which clanked as he threw it out. In obedience to a gesture from Pierre he unfastened the knotted corners, and displayed a heap of half-pence which must have been worth several francs. From his other trousers pocket he pulled a folded newspaper, and as he turned the pocket inside out he tried to slip up his sleeve some silver and a ten-franc piece which Pierre's quick eyes instantly discovered. In his blouse, a flask and a half-eaten roll with a good slice of ham between its crusts, had been thrust out of sight, beneath his dirty handkerchief.

We children looked on stupefied.

"You see," Pierre said to Esquebesse, "he is a vicious rogue. He is not poor, he is not hungry, and he would have used violence to steal from these children. I am for justice, and where there is crime I would have chastisement. It is that," and he pointed to the wretched creature on the ground, "which is the ruin of us honest people. He will not work, but he must eat fine bread and ham, and there are thousands like him. They agitate the country, and we honest people dare not move, for we know well that filth is there at the bottom, asking nothing better than to disseminate itself if it is stirred."

Esquebesse took his pipe out of his mouth and slowly puffed away a mouthful of smoke. "You are right," he said; "it is they who ruin us. Who ruins them?"

Pierre looked at him for a moment in silence, and then turned to the tramp.

"Where do you come from?" he asked.

"From Tarbes."

"Before that?"

"From Bayonne."

"You were born in the South?"

"No, I am a Parisian;" and the man looked up for the first time with something like a gleam of pride.

"A famous Parisian! What are your parents?"

"Is that your business? It is nothing to you who are my parents."

"Answer," said Pierre.

"I know nothing of them. I have been told that I was born at the factory."

Esquebesse had taken up the newspaper and was looking at it.

"Yes," he said, "that's it, born in the factory, of unknown parents; and afterwards they are nourished with stuff like this." He read aloud as he spoke from the newspaper :

"'The people is above the law, it is for the people now to efface with its broad foot the law which it has written in the sand.' And those are not the words of an obscure newspaper writer; they are words spoken out in the daylight before all France by a man who aspires to the position of a leader.

"Ah! we want leaders. We are like sheep without any shepherds. Is it astonishing that wolves slip in amongst us? In England,"—and he turned to Hector,— "the old aristocracy have not abandoned the people so, they have kept their rightful place; they work for the people and with the people; they are the leaders; they employ their leisure in gaining knowledge, and their knowledge is at the service of the country. When I was young, I went to England with M. le Comte, and I saw your aristocracy. You have your

share of young idlers and dandies, but it is not they, with all their glitter, who uphold your nobility. You have still in your great English families gentlemen who would hold themselves disgraced if they did not work harder for their country than any of the labourers they daily see work for themselves. This is what I understand by a true aristocrat, and that is how your country is kept straight. Each class does its own work. Those who have instruction lead, those who know little follow. We have made noble efforts, we French people, but here, now for more than a hundred years, our aristocracy has failed us. We, who know nothing, have been forced to put ourselves forward. Ambition was soon mixed in it, and what has been the result?—convulsion after convulsion—hope lifting the nation, and then despair. It is for those whose fortune and position is assured to stand in the front. They can disengage their mind from the thought of reward. But when the personal ends to be gained are too great, who can say that his eyes would not be dazzled by the flash of vainglory, nor his hand turned aside to grasp power for himself?"

Esquebesse replaced his pipe in his mouth, and drew from it a long whiff of smoke. The man at his feet sat without attempting to rise, or to collect the contents of his pockets, which lay scattered on the dead leaves round him. Dirty, unshaven, ragged, the

top of his head bald, and the long hair around falling over his ears and the collar of his coat, he seemed to wait, with eyes cast down, the further pleasure of his captors. I was glad he did not raise his eyes, for I was so full of curiosity I could not help looking at him, and I dreaded at the same time to see that wicked expression again.

Esquebesse seemed to take no more account of his presence than if he had been a dead rabbit or a weasel. "I never see an idle rogue like that," he said, "without thinking of the idle gentlemen who have abdicated their rights. There are some who would say it does not concern me, but as one gets old, tranquilly in the depths of one's woods the mind has leisure to occupy itself with many things; and you, my little gentleman, it concerns you. Look well at that man. Fix him in your memory as he is there, with his money and his white bread, and his newspaper which bids him efface the law, for such as you see him, with his attempt to steal on his conscience, he represents crime. It is perhaps the first time you have seen it, and you don't understand much of these things yet, but keep it in your mind. There is matter there for plenty of useful reflection."

Hector's eyes had been fixed on Esquebesse while he spoke. He looked down now as though literally obeying the keeper's directions. I looked down too

at the man sitting, as I have described, on the leaves, with rounded back and downcast impenetrable face. In the midst of the silence, not knowing that we were all watching him, the man raised his head a little and flashed a glance at Pierre. It was as though he had suddenly opened to us the wickedness of his soul; his eyes were so keen, so cunning, and so malevolent that they seemed to bring you face to face with hate and revenge and cruelty. I shuddered from head to foot as I met them. He perceived that we were all looking at him. Instantly the eyelids dropped again, and the face was but a stolid mask once more; but as I looked over at Hector I could see by his strange, interested, horror-stricken expression that he too had caught the glance, and that he felt crime was terrible.

"Allons!" said Pierre, "enough has been said. It matters little to me where evil comes from or where it goes. I thrash it when I catch it under my hand, and that is what I counsel all honest folk to do. Get up now," he added to the tramp, "and since I have given you the occasion to use it, I will give you also a little oil to rub yourself with before you go any further. Pick up your money. None of us would soil our fingers with stolen coin."

The man seemed stiff and sore, but we stood fascinated and watched till every coin was picked up, and his knife and his roll and his newspaper replaced in

the pockets from which they had come. Then as he turned to follow Pierre and Esquebesse to the forge we sped up the darkening lane, I at all events seized with sudden fear, and not daring to look behind me till I reached the shelter of the porch. From there, as I glanced round, I saw the figures of three men dark against the red lights of the forge, and Georges inside quietly lighting his pipe with a glowing cinder. But I had no desire to watch them farther; I was too glad to run down the passage and find myself in our own safe kitchen, where Madelon was busy with her sauce-pans and Jean was washing his hands at the sink in preparation for his supper.

CHAPTER VII.

GRANDMÈRE sat in the dining-room knitting by the little fire, which we still enjoyed in these chilly spring evenings. The door was open between the dining-room and the kitchen, so she called to us when she heard our voices, and we went in and told our story. Madelon came in too to lay the cloth for supper, and her indignation was great at the recital. What excited her most was that our beggar should have had white bread to eat.

"Ah! the villain," she said, "yes, that's how it is; we honest people work and deny ourselves, and think corn bread good enough for every day, and the rascals who are not worth feeding live on the fat of the land. Ah tenez, they speak much of Providence; if I had the arranging of things, it would not be the good-for-nothings who should eat white bread."

But Grandmère put on her spectacles and looked sharply through them at Madelon.

"That's well," she said, "that's very well ; that's the way we should speak before children ! *Fi donc*, *made-moiselle*, I should have thought you had more good sense."

Madelon was close upon forty at this time, but she had lived with us already for twenty years, and when Grandmère was vexed she always spoke to her as though she were still a little girl. On this occasion Madelon said no more, but began to wind up the lamp on the sideboard, and Grandmère continued to us :

"Did that man seem happy to you with his white bread and his smoked ham ?"

"Oh, no !" we both cried at once.

"If you had each a piece of corn bread and garlic to go and eat in the woods, would you not have been far happier than he ?"

We thought of how we had enjoyed ourselves down in the woods that very afternoon, and we told of the fun that we had had.

"And the reason of that difference," Grandmère pursued, "is that you are innocent, and he is guilty. For remember well this, children, that he who abandons his duty is not only wicked, he is a very great fool, for he abandons happiness too. With innocence the simplest life is happy. As soon as you begin to do evil, all the splendours in the world leave you miserable. The ways of Providence are inscrutable. We

do not understand them all, but there is no need that we should ; for nobody that I know of has ever asked us to do the work of Providence. A few ignorant people who imagine themselves capable of understanding everything," Grandmère raised her voice with some asperity, "will tell you that they could arrange the world much better ; but that only proves that they have as little faith as they have good sense. I tell you that we see here below a very little piece at a time of the great scheme, and that one must be mad to attempt to judge that of which we hardly know the A B C. During my long life I have seen that the dishonest are unhappy, while the honest and industrious, and those who know that they must not meddle with what they do not understand, are happy. And that seems to me enough for reasonable people."

Madelon knew as well as we did that the last part of Grandmère's speech was intended for her, and we heard her muttering in the kitchen as she carried the lamp away to light, but she did not dare for the moment to make any more remarks.

Grandmère's supper was very simple : in winter a dish of vegetables with a piece of bread comprised her whole bill of fare, and in summer a salad, a pear, or a bunch of grapes replaced the hot dish of vegetables. For me there was always a boiled egg, and

how can I describe the lively pleasure I felt when this evening after the lamp had been put in the middle of the round table, and the dish of haricots set as usual before Grandmère, Madelon brought in two boiled eggs upon a plate instead of the one which I had been accustomed to for years. It seems a little thing to take pleasure from, but of all the happy sensations of that day none stays with me more vividly than the joy I felt when Madelon brought in our two eggs and I realized afresh that I had a companion now in supper and in everything.

"Monsieur the scoundrel sups no doubt on partridges," Madelon remarked audibly to Jean as she served the remainder of the haricots for their supper in the kitchen; and I thought in my heart that Grandmère was right; no matter what he had, I felt sure he was not as happy as I while I ate my egg slowly, looking at Hector.

"Yes," Grandmère said, when supper was finished, and Madelon had cleared the table, "Esquebesse says truly; it is with idleness that crime begins; therefore Zélie, since you have amused yourself all day, you will fetch your thimble now, and help me to make blue pinafores for Hector. His fine clothes will soon be spoilt in running over the country with you; also, such a dress is not suitable. And you," she said, turning to Hector, "you must be useful too. If you

know how to read, you shall read me my newspaper while I work."

I had been surprised to see Grandmère produce her work-basket after supper, for as long as I could remember it had been her custom to devote the evening hour to her newspaper. The only sounds ever to be heard in the dining-room during that hour were the ticking of the great clock in the corner, and the occasional rustle of the newspaper; varied in winter by the tapping of the evergreens upon the window-pane, and in summer by the evening songs of the birds outside in the orchard; and I had been accustomed whenever I wanted conversation to carry my spinning into the kitchen, and sit there by the hearth, or on the doorstep, according to season, chatting with Madelon while she went about her work. It had never occurred to me that Grandmère could give that hour up, and to see her change the habit of so many years in order to work for Hector made me realize how kind and good she was. I was therefore doubly glad that she told Hector to read to her—glad for Grandmère's sake that she should not altogether miss the newspaper she enjoyed, and glad and proud that she should hear how beautifully Hector could read.

I had a little chair of my own, upon which I always sat; but there was no little chair for Hector; so he

got into Bonpapa's rush-bottomed armchair, which had stood empty for years beside the fire-place. It was too high for his feet to touch the ground, and sitting there opposite to Grandmère with his legs crossed and one heel resting for support on the rung of the chair, he gravely read us out the news of the day.

I have the blue pinafores still which Grandmère and I made that spring for Hector. They are shabby and faded now ; but I never see them lying in a corner of the cupboard where I keep my linen without thinking of those quiet evenings, with the fire of vine branches crackling on the hearth and Hector's voice musical in the silence, while we plied our needles through the dark-blue stuff.

I understood very little that first evening of what Hector read. It was chiefly about the army and the length of time that men should serve. But he seemed soon to become interested, and he began to ask Grandmère questions, which she answered as gravely as if he had been a man of her own age. She told him about our conscription for the army, which they do not have in England. He hardly would believe at first that all our young men had to go, when they were twenty-one, and draw lots to be soldiers or to stay at home. Grandmère told him how few escape by drawing good lots ; and she described to him the scene in the market-place the day Georges of St. Loubouët went to

draw. The groups dressed in their Sunday clothes, standing about talking to keep up their spirits before their boys went in to draw; the anxious mothers and fathers standing in couples by the door of the mairie while their sons' fate was being decided within; the eager looks cast at the lot stuck in each lad's hat as he came out; the cries of joy when it was good, the starting tears, the silent hand-shake, the despairing pallor, when it was bad. "Ah," she said, "it would have needed a heart of stone to see old Jeanti stand there waiting when Georges' turn came, and not to have been touched by it. His wife was not dead then, but ill in bed at home, and he stood alone close by the door of the mairie. When I saw him he was leaning on his stick holding his cap in his hand and the wind was blowing his white hair.

" 'I am saying a little prayer,' he said to me, 'while the lad draws. For if this turns badly, I doubt much it will kill the wife.'

"I joined him and made also my prayer that Georges might succeed. But it was no use. After a few minutes the boy came out, and I could see the fatal lot even before he reached the door.

"Jeanti recognized his son as soon as I did, but in his trembling eagerness he did not perceive the lot.

" 'How has it gone, Georges? I don't see clearly.'

"Georges himself was as white as a ghost. 'No

luck, father ; I must go.' And the old man put his cap upon his head and said only—' God's will be done.'

"He was not mistaken, it killed the boy's mother ; Georges hadn't been gone three weeks when she was in her grave. Ah ! that conscription, it is the scourge of the country. It takes all our best young men."

"It's not just," Hector said. "In England no one could take them and send them against their will to fight."

"Oh, for that, yes," said Grandmère. "So long as the country wants them, it is just that they go. But it is war which is sad, and the passions of men which make war necessary. If Germany is to burst in upon us again, we must be ready to thrust her back, and who so fit to defend us as our sons. There is no help for it, we must give them ; but it is hard for the fathers and mothers."

Then she began to describe to Hector the hardships of a soldier's daily life, the fatiguing sentry work, the evil-smelling barracks, the scanty food, the want of money, the separation from all they loved ; till he said in his thoughtful way—

"It seems to me that to be a good Frenchman you must be a hero."

"Yes," said Grandmère, "and as all the world has not heroic blood, it happens that we see sometimes very bad Frenchmen like your tramp of to-day."

Hector finished the newspaper, and then at about half-past eight Grandmère sent us to bed. I only lay awake long enough to hear her locking the doors downstairs, and the dogs baying in the yard as Madelon let them loose for the night. Then with the happy feeling that we were well protected against foreign enemies and tramps and miseries of all kind, I fell asleep to dream of Hector and birds'-nests and the bright spring woods.

CHAPTER VIII.

H ECTOR'S first thought in the morning was of birds again. He was out in the woods before sunrise to hear them wake. I could not go with him, for Grandmère told me to watch the milk while it boiled ; but when breakfast was ready, I heard the welcome sound of his peach whistle in the lane, and looking out I saw him sauntering along with Esquebesse. They stopped under the elder-trees, and while Esquebesse took the peach-stone in his own hands to examine, Hector pulled the "Avicéptologie" from his pocket and pointed out a passage. One of the dogs, hoping perhaps for something better than books, poked his nose into the gaping pocket, but neither Hector nor the keeper paid any attention to him.

Esquebesse took the volume and read what Hector had pointed out, while Hector gazed up anxiously in his face. Then the volume was returned. Esquebesse nodded in confirmation of what he had read, and

stretched his hand in the direction of Cassagne. They were talking, Hector still with eager upturned face, not heeding in the least where he went, when they reached the gate and Grandmère came into the porch.

"Good morning, M. Esquebesse. I see with pleasure that the little lad chooses his friends well. But if he is as hungry as he was yesterday, he would do well not to accompany you just now, for his breakfast waits in there; and then later the Sister will come for the schooling. Duty must pass before everything."

"Very certainly, madame. I am not taking him away, I am bringing him back. I also have my duties to attend to for the moment. But I shall have occasion soon to visit the woods out beyond Cassagne, and if you permit it I will take him with me when I go. It seems he has an ambition to become a bird-catcher."

The woods beyond Cassagne! It meant the whole afternoon away from me unless M. Esquebesse would take me too. I dared not ask, but I suppose my face betrayed my thought, for at that moment his eyes lighted upon me, and he added, good-naturedly, "And the little one shall come too if she likes."

"With you, M. Esquebesse, they are in good hands; you will take them where you like. Once their duties are attended to they are free. But you must not put yourself out for them."

"No danger, madame, no danger ; you know that I like children. Come then, after dinner," he added, to Hector, "to my house, and we will see what we can do. Zélie knows the way. Good-morning, Madame Loustanoff." He whistled to his dogs and passed on down the lane, while we went in to breakfast, in the kitchen, full of delight.

Our delight was changed to sorrow and humiliation when Sœur Amélie came ; for then, and only then, did we remember the sum and the lessons which were to have been done for her.

She was, of course, very angry ; most deservedly so with me, for the ways of the house were not new to me, and I had no excuse for having forgotten. I felt exceedingly penitent, and would have tried hard to do a double number of sums that morning to atone for my fault ; but Sœur Amélie had so much to say about our naughty behaviour, that there was no time to prove our sorrow by our acts. Hector did not even seem to feel sorry. He sat perfectly silent under the reproaches which were addressed to him, flushing a little at first when Sœur Amélie spoke of the bad end to which the idle and disobedient were sure to come ; but afterwards, while she expatiated upon the theme, I could see that his thoughts were far away.

"Those who do not work should not eat. Do you suppose that a good dinner would be put upon this

table at twelve o'clock to-day if others had not worked ? and can you reconcile it to your conscience ?" the Sister was saying, when Hector started from his chair, with a joyous light in his eyes, and cried out—

"Why, Zélie, if you were right about them, they might be hatched to-day. I quite forgot to look this morning."

He encountered as he started up Sœur Amélie's astonished gaze, and suddenly remembered where he was. In an instant he had banished the joy from his eyes, and with what must, I am sure, have been a tremendous effort of politeness, he put on an expression so miserably guilty that as he sat down again I found it impossible to help laughing.

I knew how wrong it was of me, I felt horribly wicked ; but I could not help it, the laughter was out before I had had time to think.

"Oh ! ma Sœur, I beg your pardon," I exclaimed ; "I know I should not have laughed, but Hector's face was so funny."

My attempt at explanation was unfortunate ; Sœur Amélie would hear no more.

"Funny !" she exclaimed ; "you find his naughtiness funny. Then it is time for your grandmother to let you hear what she thinks of such drollery. Madame Loustanoff," she called through the open door into the kitchen, "will you have the kindness to come and tell

these children what you think of their behaviour? It seems that what I say is only laughable."

Madelon called back from the sink, where she was scouring saucepans, that Madame Loustanoff was in the farm-yard; and I heard her shout through the window, in *patois*, to Jean, that he was to find Madame Loustanoff and tell her that the Sister wanted her to come and make the children listen to reason.

I sat horror-stricken. Such a thing had never happened to me in my life before, as to have a formal complaint of my behaviour carried to Grandmère; and the idea of bringing her in from her occupation on the farm only for the purpose of speaking to us seemed to me so monstrous, that I gazed at Hector in blank dismay, unable even to find words for a supplication.

Hector also seemed to feel this.

"It was not at you," he tried to explain, "that Zélie was laughing."

But Sœur Amélie had taken the strong measure, and was prepared to support it now with dignity.

"Silence, sir," she said, "you will exculpate yourself to Madame Loustanoff."

The blood rushed into his cheeks; but he was silent, and then we all sat and waited for Grandmère.

She came at last in her short gray dress and sabots, with her large hat tied over her cap, and the bunch of

big keys in her hand. I could see by the firm set of her mouth and the brightness of her little dark eyes that she was not inclined to be trifled with.

Sœur Amélie, rather whiter than usual for anger, poured out the story of our misbehaviour. We had begun, she said, with carelessness and inattention yesterday, we had gone on with idleness, and when she blamed us for leaving our tasks undone, we had laughed at her remonstrances.

We sat with eyes fixed on Grandmère while the Sister was speaking. Even to our own ears our conduct, thus related, sounded indeed inexcusable, and I knew Grandmère well enough to know that she would not think lightly of misbehaviour.

"Hein ! they laughed at you, did they ?" she said, "that was pretty, very pretty."

"It was Zélie alone who laughed," explained the Sister.

"Oh, it was Zélie alone who permitted herself that little diversion ? And from whence do you take, mademoiselle, these airs of the town ? If it is from our little gentleman here, the sooner you are humiliated before him the better. Pass me that distaff."

My empty distaff stood in the corner of the dining-room leaning up against the wall. I fetched it as Grandmère desired.

"Stretch out your hand," she said.

I stretched it out timidly in horrible fear of what was coming, and the next instant a smart blow upon the palm of my hand made my arm tingle to the shoulder. It was not the pain alone which made my cheeks burn, and the tears start suddenly from my eyes; but the feeling of shame and humiliation which overcame me was hardly felt before Hector caused me to forget it; for no sooner was my hand withdrawn than he pulled his from his pocket and thrust it forward, saying—"It was as much my fault as hers. I made her laugh."

Grandmère looked at him sharply for an instant.

"If your fault was the same you deserve the same punishment," she said; and she brought the distaff down upon his hand with a blow every bit as hard as the one she had given me. Hector did not seem to like it any better than I did, and we both looked ruefully at our reddened palms, while Grandmère proceeded—

"And they have been idle? Well, there are not two words to say on the subject. You understand that at Salaret the idle do not eat white bread and smoked ham. It is a question of finishing before twelve all the lessons Sœur Amélie sets you, or Madelon lays but one plate on our dinner-table."

With that she turned round and went away, and

Hector and I sat down very quietly to our lessons. I found my slate-pencil hard to hold in my hot and sore right hand, and looking across the table I saw that Hector was in equal difficulty. He went on steadily, however, so I determined to go on steadily too, and for a time no sound was heard but the squeak of our pencils on the slates. Then Sœur Amélie went into the kitchen, and returning almost immediately with some vinegar in a cup, she tore her own handkerchief in half, and after soaking the two strips in vinegar she bound our hands for us, so deftly and comfortably, that in a few minutes the pain was almost gone.

She did not say a word to us, and except for the "thank you" we each uttered in return for the binding of our hands, no one spoke till the lessons were all learned and the hour of repetition came.

"Well!" said Grandmère, as she passed through the dining-room just before Sœur Amélie went. "Is the work done?"

"Oh yes, madame. Everything is finished. They have been very good, and I am sure they regret now that they were naughty."

"So much the better," Grandmère said. And without waiting for any assurance from us to that effect, she went on into the kitchen, where we heard her saying to Madelon :

"You can lay the places as usual. Every one has gained their dinner."

"I had a great deal rather not have any dinner," Hector said, in a low voice to me, as having put our books away we went and stood aimlessly in the porch, where a row of pigeons sat cooing on the lintel.

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because it seems as if I had worked to get dinner, and I didn't care one scrap for that."

"But there's no shame in working for your dinner, is there?"

"There's no shame for a labourer. Gentlemen are different."

"And what difference do you find, my little gentleman?" asked Grandmère's voice sarcastic behind us.

Hector flushed deeply at being overheard, and instead of answering looked away from Grandmère out over the vineyards.

"Voyons, explain yourself; show us the reason why the gentleman should not work for his dinner."

I waited rather anxiously for Hector's answer, for Grandmère had always taught me that it was silly pride to suppose there was any great difference between gentlemen and good labourers, and I was disappointed that Hector should have one petty thought. He seemed to have some little difficulty in explaining himself. He continued to gaze for a moment over the

fields, and then he said, with an evident effort, but quite clearly and steadily—

“Gentlemen ought to work for something better than dinner. There is no shame for a poor man, because if he didn’t gain food he’d have to die. Gentlemen have everything they need, and they ought not to work for themselves at all. They ought to work for other people. It doesn’t matter a bit to be hungry once in a way. I have tried going without my dinner and tea just to see.”

“So,” said Grandmère, and there was no sarcasm in her voice now, “your idea of the difference between a gentleman and a plebeian is that the gentleman works for others, and the plebeian for himself. Well, keep that idea, it will do you no harm if you act up to it. But,” and the sharp look came into her eyes again, “just tell me this. If you didn’t do your lessons for the sake of dinner, how does it happen that they have been all done since you understood that without lessons there was no dinner?”

“It was not because of dinner. It was because I hate for her,” and he nodded his head in the direction of Sœur Amélie’s departure, “to tell you that I am idle. I am not idle.” There was a passionate note of disclaimer in his voice which seemed to please Grandmère, for she smiled and nodded her head as she replied—

"We shall see that."

Then she left us to go and see after the labourers, and Hector and I, being after all exceedingly hungry, were attracted by the good smell of cabbage-soup to the kitchen, where, forgetting our troubles, we peeped into the saucepans and helped and hindered Madelon, till the welcome hour of noon brought Grandmère in again, and dinner.

An hour latter, with the "Avicéptologie" safely stowed in Hector's pocket and my knitting in my hand, we started to fulfil our appointment with Esquebesse. We had not far to go to reach his cottage, only about a kilometre up and down through the woods, and then along a bit of an old by-road bordered, as our lane was, with flowers. I remember well how it looked that day with the row of dark-green box-bushes, which separated it on one side from the wood, glittering in the sunlight behind the gorse and white thorn, and luxuriant patches of swift-growing periwinkle covering the hedge-row grass, and opening their blue blossoms boldly in the dust of the road. The wild strawberries were still in flower all along the ditch, and violets and cuckoo blossom and bright yellow celandines seemed to form a little court around the more stately imperial crowns. Hector had never seen so many wild flowers all together. He said it reminded him of some words that he had read—"The wilderness and the solitary

place shall be glad for them, and the desert shall rejoice and blossom as the rose." I asked him who wrote those words, and he told me one of the Prophets, he didn't remember which. Since then I have always liked to picture the Prophets walking in woods like ours, and thinking of God.

We did not hurry, but zigzagged from side to side of the road, peeping into the box-bushes for birds'-nests, looking under the strawberry-leaves to see if the fruit were forming—poking, peering, smelling, admiring everywhere. We neither of us had hands to spare, for Hector wanted every minute to use his, and I from time to time remembered my knitting; so whatever flowers Hector picked he stuck, stalk downward, into my big pinafore pocket; and as I took care in my scrambling not to hurt them, he told me before we reached the cottage that I made a most capital little donkey. I was so pleased that I think at the moment I would have asked nothing better of life than to be his little donkey for ever.

Esquebesse's cottage stood at the end of this bit of road, back under the shade of the wood. He and his goat and his two dogs lived there alone, but they had a very comfortable little home. When people asked Esquebesse why he did not marry, he always said that the situation of his house was too lonely, he could not ask any woman to remain there by herself, while he



"HE PUT HIMSELF IN FRONT OF ME WHILE HE HELD MY HAND TIGHT,
AND SAID, 'STAND QUITE STILL.'"

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was the old carved cupboard, where family linen had been stored for generations, and on a low oak table against the wall some cabbages were piled, with half a pumpkin and two or three onions. Nets and other utensils for bird-catching hung from the smoke-blackened rafters above, interspersed with rabbit-skins and bunches of garlic. We did not see any one in the room, but as the dogs were lying out in the sun before the cottage door, we knew that Esquebesse was not far off, and we advanced, intending to enter and wait. The dogs did not approve of this intention, and no sooner did we manifest it than they started up and came towards us, barking with such a distinctly inhospitable accent, that if I had not been holding Hector's hand I should certainly have turned round and run away. They were big hunting dogs, known to be fierce; and even Hector, I think, was a little frightened as one of them suddenly rushed at us, for he put himself in front of me while he held my hand tight and said, "Stand quite still."

At that moment, however, a voice from within called—

"Here, Bruno; lie down, Loup Garou;" and as Bruno paused in his advance, Dr. Charles of Portauve appeared upon the threshold of the kitchen.

"These dogs are too zealous in the discharge of their duty," he said as he advanced to meet us.

"Esquebesse went up to M. le Comte half an hour ago and left them to guard the house and me ; but he told me he was expecting you, and during all the time that they have lived together the dogs should have become better acquainted with their master's hospitable nature."

He took my hand as he spoke and led me past the danger which had frightened me, into the shelter of the house. Hector, however, instead of following us, remained on the threshold, standing quietly between the dogs.

Dr. Charles had only lately come back then from Bordeaux, to be the assistant of our old doctor, Du Verger, at Cassagne. His mother, Madame de la Meillierie, is a cousin of Grandmère's, but as she has always lived at Portalouve, which is seventeen kilometres off, I scarcely remembered at that time to have ever seen her. Grandmère and I did not often move as far as seventeen kilometres. I knew Dr. Charles, for I had seen him more than once at Salaret, and sometimes I had met him in the lanes or woods, about the farm, with his trousers rolled up and the mud thick upon his boots, hunting in out-of-the-way places for specimens of stones and flowers. I had heard the country people speak too of his knowledge, and his goodness to his mother, so I did not feel shy at all when I found myself in the kitchen alone

with him. It was the first time I had ever seen him without his spectacles, and as I looked up to thank him for coming out, I saw how kind and gentle his eyes were.

The remains of an omelette and a loaf and a bottle of wine on the table, with Dr. Charles' hat and specimen case lying beside them, showed that he had been enjoying the hospitality of Esquebesse; and when he had answered my few words of thanks and stuck my bunch of flowers into a pitcher of water that stood by the cabbages, he began to clear the table.

"When hunger assails me in the woods and I find myself very far from dinner," he said, "I always come and beg an omelette from Esquebesse; but it is not just that I should leave disorder in his kitchen."

Seeing what he wanted to do, I took a bowl from the dresser, and while he went to put the remains of the loaf into the bread-pan, I washed his plate and glass and fork.

"Tiens, my child, you are helping me?" he said when he came back.

"You helped me, monsieur, just now."

He smiled, and stood watching me while I polished the glass with a dry cloth as Grandmère had taught me to do.

"The fact is," he said, "Esquebesse gains in

the exchange; if I had washed his glass it is probable that he would have had to wash it again before he used it."

Then he sat down and opened his specimen case, leaving the rest of the table for me to clear.

CHAPTER IX.

I HAD cleared the table, and Hector, having finished his inspection of the dogs, had come in and was standing with me watching Dr. Charles' proceedings at a respectful distance, when Esquebesse arrived.

"Pouf," he said as he took off his hat and wiped his face, "I have kept you waiting; but I have arranged all our little affairs satisfactorily. I passed round by Salaret, and Madame Loustanoff trusts the children to us. Now we have nothing else to do but to start."

"Where are we going?" asked Hector.

"Where are we going? Dr. Charles has told you nothing? We are going the whole way to Portalouve. Dr. Charles goes to spend Sunday with his mother, and he will drive us there in his little carriage. Baptiste, the miller, went yesterday evening to Montfort, and he will give us a lift back."

We children cared little how we were to get there or how we were to come back. That we were going to Portalouve was enough for us. Had Esquebesse suddenly announced that he meant to take us to Paris, I could hardly have felt more excited. Portalouve, thirteen kilometres on the other side of Cassagne, fully halfway to Montfort where Georges and the soldiers were, seemed indeed to me a new country. How Esquebesse had ever persuaded Grandmère to let us go I could not imagine, and I dared not ask for fear any flaw might appear in the permission and hinder our departure even now.

Hector took our good luck much more coolly than I; he seemed pleased when Esquebesse first announced it, but his interest had been awakened by Dr. Charles' specimens; and even while Esquebesse was bringing the old carriage round from the back yard where the horse had been tied, and making such preparations as he thought necessary before quitting the house, Hector was listening intently to a description Dr. Charles was giving him of the inward and outward growth of vegetable stems. Esquebesse had no respect, apparently, for his love of knowledge. As soon as he was ready to lock the house he told him to run out and put up the shutters, which Hector did with the greatest goodwill. Esquebesse fastened them on the inside, then we all went out; I saw the key turned at last

in the door, and in another minute we had fairly started.

Dr. Charles' carriage was a funny old vehicle with a hood, intended to hold only two people; but Dr. Charles and Esquebesse made room for me between them, and Hector sat very comfortably on the foot-board at our feet. The old yellow nag which Dr. Du Verger had bought from Grandmère fifteen or sixteen years before, was so well accustomed to the road that it went almost of its own accord, and there was nothing to interfere with the delight I had in seeing our beautiful country and in showing it to Hector. As far as Cassagne I knew it myself, after that I had to leave all his questions to be answered by Dr. Charles and Esquebesse; but I was well content to listen, for he asked questions that I should never have thought of asking, and in answering them Dr. Charles and Esquebesse talked together, and told us so much that was interesting, that the world began to seem to me much bigger than it had ever seemed before. A long way past Cassagne we passed a vineyard where a number of men were digging. Esquebesse told us it belonged to M. le Comte, and he stopped the carriage that we might see what they were doing. An overseer was directing them, and after speaking a few words to Dr. Charles, he took my hand and led me to a part of the vineyard where the ground was thrown up round

a large square ditch. We mounted on the sides of the ditch, and looking down we saw to my surprise, at about three or four feet below the surface of the vineyard, what looked to me like a beautiful painted pavement. The design was of baskets of fruit and flowers, with game and fish lying round ; the workmen had just washed it, and the wet colours glowed in the sun almost like precious stones.

"What is it?" I asked. "Why does M. le Comte have his vineyard paved?"

The overseer smiled, and Dr. Charles explained that this pavement which I saw was called a mosaic, and that it was not M. le Comte who had put it in the vineyard, but probably some Roman noble more than a thousand years before. M. le Comte had only found it, and was having it transported to the floor of his own dining-room.

"The Romans have lived here then?" said Hector, raising his head and looking round as though he expected still to see their palaces on the slopes of the hills.

"There is little doubt," said the overseer gravely, "that they have spat on this very pavement."

He was mocking at the sudden light which had sprung into Hector's face, but Esquebesse answered almost at the same time with a kindly smile—

"Therefore, if we must be heroes in order to be

good Frenchmen, Frenchmen should not forget that they have the blood of heroes in their veins. Hein!"

I wondered how Esquebesse knew that Hector had said men should be heroes to be good Frenchmen, but Hector did not seem to notice that.

"If those mountains could speak," he said, pointing to the snow-line of the Pyrenees, which seemed in the clear atmosphere of the spring afternoon to lie quite close to us, "how awfully interesting it would be to ask them questions. I do so long often to ask questions of all the old things, who were there before we were born."

"It is a question of learning their language," said Dr. Charles, thoughtfully. And as they stood so looking at the mountains, I heard one of the workmen say to another—

"Who is the little chap?"

"It's the English boy, from Loustanoff's."

An incredulous laugh was the only answer.

"What are you laughing at? It is so."

"Not he. He's not English."

"Why not?"

"He's too handsome."

Two or three of them drew together, and looked at him critically as he stood on the edge of the ditch talking to Esquebesse and Dr. Charles.

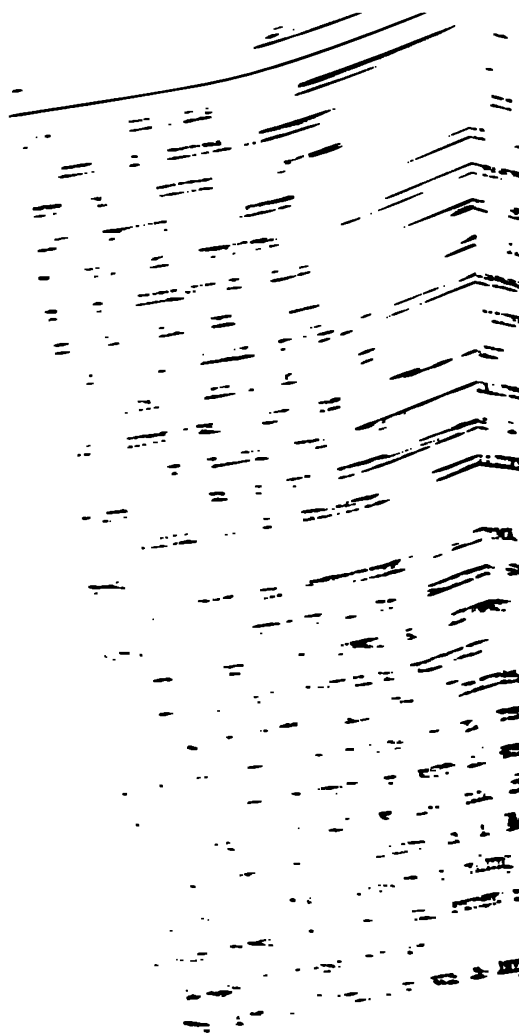
"He is solidly built," said one; "he will go far."

And I, who had never thought before whether he was handsome or ugly, felt my heart beat faster with pride in him as I looked. Once in the carriage again, Dr. Charles began to tell us about the old Romans, and the drive through the flowering country from the mosaics to Portalouve seemed to pass almost like a dream. But it was one of those dreams of which one never loses the recollection. I see still, as though it had been but yesterday, the purple of the bursting woods which clothed the hills, the orchards everywhere in blossom, the yellow mustard-fields, the glaring crimson sainfoin, the bright tender green of the flax-fields, the rich brown earth where the lately planted maize was germinating. Over all, the blue sky, with clouds driving high up before the wind, and in the distance the sparkling peaks of the Pyrenees girdling us in. It was Saturday, so we were not alone upon the road. A bright stream of buyers and sellers flocked to and from the Saturday markets; vehicles of all sorts passed us frequently, and Dr. Charles and Esquebesse, who knew most of the people for many miles round, told us to whom they belonged and where they were going, and exchanged many a greeting with the passers-by. They say it is very grand to drive in the Bois de Boulogne, and that the carriages there are finer than I have any idea of. All the same, I do not believe that any lady in Paris ever had a

happier drive in the Bois than I had that day between Salaret and Portalouve. Esquebesse stopped at an inn where the road branched off to Montfort, and told them to bid the miller wait for us when he came back from Montfort in the evening; and after that, another quarter of an hour of driving brought us to Dr. Charles' home.

I was rather cramped with sitting so long, and I remember that when the carriage stopped at the yard gate Dr. Charles lifted me out and carried me himself across the slush of the farm-yard to the kitchen-door, while Hector followed between the very muzzles of two big St. Bernards. The barking of the dogs brought out Madame de la Meillerie, and she was so delighted to see her son that she kissed me and Hector in the warmth of her heart almost as affectionately as she kissed Dr. Charles. I see her still as she stood in the doorway in her ample black dress and lilac sun-bonnet, her broad kind face beaming with pleasure.

Had she something nice to give the children for goûter? of course she had. Some little cakes were baking at this minute in the oven for to-morrow's dessert, and they should taste the Spanish melon jam of which she had spoken last New Year to Madame Loustanoff. As for Esquebesse, it was not now that she had to tell him he was always welcome at Porta-



louve; a little glass of her old Malaga would do him no harm, she fancied, after his long drive. And then there was a rattling of keys and a bustling about, and hasty direction to Jeanne and Marguerite; and while we stood and stretched ourselves before the kitchen fire the dining-room table was set out with cakes and jam and milk and a pâté de foie gras, and a dusty bottle of old Malaga for Esquebesse.

"Allons, Charlot, eat a bit yourself; I'll be bound your dinner was a light one to-day."

"You are making cruel reproaches to Esquebesse, mother. It was he who furnished it."

"Nothing but an omelette, madame," said Esquebesse.

"Ah, I know that everything is good in Esquebesse's house, but an omelette all the same soon leaves place for other things. Sit down, sit down;" and she cut into the pâté with hospitable vigour.

"I ask no better," said Dr. Charles, "your pâtés, my mother, are to be refused by no reasonable man." And in another moment we were all seated round the table eating as though we also had dined upon Dr. Charles' omelette. Madame de la Meillerie waited upon us, and took pleasure in piling up our plates; but she herself took nothing except a little half-glass of Malaga to please her son.

The farm at Portalouve was as large as Salaret, and





"DO YOU KNOW IN YOUR COUNTRY, MADEMOISELLE, A GIRL CALLED
IRMA LAGRACE?" P. 115.

Madame de la Meillerie was very busy that afternoon. So when after goûter Esquebesse went away to attend to the business which had brought him to that part of the country, Dr. Charles followed his mother into the yard to give her the benefit of his advice in some bargains she had to make that afternoon, and Hector and I were free to ramble where we pleased. Our rambles took us at first no farther than the kitchen. The servant Jeanne, who was a girl from our side of Cassagne, was only too glad of a chance of hearing news from her village, and while Hector amused himself with sauntering about looking at everything, she made me pass all our neighbours and their affairs in review. A very respectable woman, who wore her hair uncovered like a lady, was sitting at work in one corner of the kitchen. She seemed to listen with interest to what we were saying, and presently, when Jeanne's questions became a little slack, she asked in a pleasant, quiet voice—

“Do you know in your country, mademoiselle, a girl called Irma Lagrace?”

The name at once attracted Hector's attention.

“Is that our Irma?” he asked, coming up to my side as he spoke.

“Yes,” I said, answering both him and the work-woman. “We know her very well, madame. Do you wish for news of her?”

"I do not know her myself; but I have heard her spoken of very often. They say she is very pretty."

"She is the prettiest person I know," Hector said with a decision which astonished me.

"I see nothing so very remarkable in her," said Jeanne with a toss of the head. "People have got it into their heads that she is very pretty, and the men all run after her, because men are like sheep; what one does the others must do. But all that has no common-sense in it. She is no better than the other girls of the village. And then between nine of them, I ask you what sort of a *dot* she is likely to have?"

"The *dot* counts for little if the suitor is rich. They say she is pretty enough to be married for her beauty."

"Bah! it is only that old idiot of a miller who says so, and what does he know about beauty? It is not in his family, at all events, that he would have learnt to admire it."

"My cousin Georges has told me the same, and he at all events has eyes."

"Are you Georges' cousin Marie, that he goes to see at Montfort?" asked Hector, his eyes lighting with sudden interest.

"Yes," said the workwoman with a smile, "I am Marie Monthez, cousin of young Georges of St. Lou-bouët. You have heard him speak of me?"

I was dreadfully afraid for a moment that Hector would say more than he ought, but I might have spared my anxiety; he only replied in an absent, dreamy voice—

“Yes, I heard him say he went to see you every Sunday.”

“And since you think Irma so pretty, tell me what she is like,” Marie Monthez pursued. “Georges does not know how to describe. Tell me what she looked like the last time you saw her.”

The corners of Hector’s mouth curled up into laughter; the remembrance of the last time he had seen Irma seemed to tickle his fancy, but he said he did not know how to describe in French.

“Allons! that is foolish,” said Marie, “you speak French like ourselves. Come now, tell me what she is like. You, then, mademoiselle.”

I described as well as I could Irma’s bright curly hair, her clear complexion, her white teeth, her soft dark eyes.

“And then her lips,” said Hector; “she really has lips, as they say in story-books, the colour of cherries, and nice little feet, with good sensible shoes that she can walk in, and hands burnt a pretty brown colour in the sun. And sometimes when she laughs, she puts her head on one side just like a blackbird, doesn’t she, Zélie? The last time we saw her,” here his mouth

began to curl merrily again, "was yesterday in the wood, near our house, and the sun was shining so that little shadows of the tree-branches fell all over her as she walked along with——"

"With whom?" said a new voice suddenly and angrily behind us; and we turned round to see no less a personage than M. Baptiste the miller, himself, who had come in unobserved, and had heard perhaps everything we had been saying.

"Well. She was walking along with——" he repeated.

Hector, who had reddened nervously at the sudden interruption, recovered from the start and answered quietly—

"With her distaff. She was spinning, you know."

The miller seemed to think he had been rather foolish, for he laughed awkwardly, and glanced at Marie Monthez as he said—

"Good, good. So long as young girls only walk with their distaffs, they give proof of their good sense, do they not, Mam'selle Marie?"

"Ah! M. Baptiste, you know I have always told you you are too severe upon young people." They spoke to each other like old friends, which rather astonished Hector and me, for it had never occurred to us that the miller would also know Georges' cousin. His next words showed that he not only knew her, but knew her well.

Jeanne was at the other end of the kitchen, helping Marguerite to lift a heavy caldron from the fire, and as Hector and I stood looking out of the window, I suppose the miller considered himself as good as alone with Marie Monthez.

"Mademoiselle Marie," he said, sitting down at the opposite side of her work-table, and wiping his face slowly with a large pocket-handkerchief, "I come from seeing your parents, and it is because they told me you were here that I have come here to-day."

"You know, M. Baptiste, that where I am you are always welcome," Marie's quiet voice replied.

"For I have a question to ask you. I would like to know if it is true what they say, that you do not intend to marry?"

I glanced over my shoulder. Marie had dropped her work to listen to him. Now she took it up and began to stitch swiftly as she replied—

"I have not said that."

"It would be a pity," he went on slowly, "for from Salaret to Montfort there is not a housekeeper to compare with you. Every one knows how you have always behaved towards your parents, and he who behaves well towards his parents proves a good heart, which will lead him to behave well in other circumstances of life."

My remembrance of the drive home is much more confused than my remembrance of the afternoon drive out. Whether it was the Malaga, or the monotonous movement, or the exposure to the air, or the exceeding comfort of my position in the straw, I do not know, but I continued all along the road to fall asleep, and to wake up at intervals to see nothing but the clear dark sky above, and the outlines of Esquebesse's tall figure, and the miller's heavy round back, black and solid, in front of us, against the clearer darkness of the atmosphere. After a while the stars came out, and the miller lighted one of the lanterns of the cart. Each time I woke the air seemed to me a little fresher. Each time I woke I saw Hector sitting up in the opposite corner of the cart with a face that looked like white marble in the starlight, and dark eyes wide open, but I was covered warmly with a sack; the freshness of the air only made me sleep the more soundly, and I took heed of nothing, till, when we must have already long passed Cassagne on our homeward way, I was wakened by Hector nudging me persistently. I could not at first think what he wanted, but I soon heard that Esquebesse and the miller were talking together on their elevated seat, and the night wind was blowing their words back to us.

"Yes," the miller was saying, "I see that after a certain age marriage becomes a necessity. While one

is young all goes well ; a man likes his liberty, but later on he begins to feel the need of some one who is entirely devoted to him ; some one whom he will find always there when he comes in ; some one who will take care of him when he is ill ; who will remember the dishes that he likes ; who will look after his house ; who will put his interests before everything. You will say what you like Esquebesse. You are alone, and you have only yourself to think of, so all goes well ; but a house needs a woman at the head of it. I, for instance : for a year now my old Marie Anna has been telling me that her son wants her to go and live with him at Cassagne, and she leads me in consequence the life of a dog. I, such as you see me, I dare not tell her to put four eggs in my omelette on Friday, if she chooses to put but three. I come in hungry, she takes pleasure in making me wait half-an-hour for my dinner ; and if I dare to address a reproach to her, pouf ! it is her son who jumps down my throat. If I am not satisfied, she asks nothing better than to go and live with her own people."

Esquebesse laughed—

"There is one with whom I would soon settle my account."

"You laugh. It is easy for you. But I—I ask you a little what would become of me if she went. She has been there since the death of my mother. She

knows all that is in the house better than I know it myself, and, if she goes, I become at once a prey to all the old vultures who choose to make an entrance into my house for the purpose of wasting my substance. Could I look after them when I have my mill to attend to? Could I carry about with me the key of the linen cupboard and the provisions? Do I know—I; how many fine shirts I have, which came to me from my father and my grandfather? How many sheets my mother span since her marriage—how many she brought in her trousseau—how many she found here when she came? Marie Anna knows all that. She could tell you the year in which every sheet and tablecloth was spun. She keeps all that in repair; she arranges the wash. And if she goes, a new one comes without interest in the house; all will be under her care, and I know how much to give for the honesty of those who have no interest to serve you. All—all will go to rack and ruin. The furniture which Marie Anna has rubbed from her youth upwards, do you suppose another will care to keep it bright? All my habits, all my tastes, which Marie Anna knows as I know them myself, how shall I begin to teach them to another? I shall be wretched.”

“It is as clear as daylight,” said Esquebesse. “You must give up your liberty, and marry a reasonable

person, who will be able to supply Marie Anna's place ; only you must persuade Marie Anna to stay with you for one year after your marriage in order to show your wife the ways of the house."

"To show the ways of the house to my wife," said Baptiste, laughing, as though the sound of the words pleased him ; "that is exactly what I counted upon doing. Marie Anna shall stay for a year. At the end of that time my wife will know all, and I shall have nothing to do but to grow old in comfort, with my little ones about my knees. Ha ! ha ! Esquebesse, why do you not follow my example ?"

"Why ?" said Esquebesse, "because I have not so much wealth to take care of, nor so many tastes to be satisfied, nor the annoyance of losing an old servant to fear ; nor, before all that, the pleasure of knowing a person as sensible and as amiable as Marie Monthez. I congratulate you, miller, with all my heart. She is a person whom any one might be proud to see at the head of his household. I have never heard her spoken of with anything but the greatest esteem."

Baptiste burst out laughing again, and I thought it very funny while I heard him, that Marie Monthez could care for any one so stupid and awkward as he.

"It's not done yet," he said. "We must have a little time. But we shall see—we shall see. Here's your turning, Esquebesse."

The cart stopped as he spoke, and we found ourselves at the corner of the road which led down to Esquebesse's cottage.

We all got out of the cart, and the miller drove on, still chuckling to himself in high good-humour.

"Great egoist, va!" Esquebesse muttered as he stood and looked after him for a moment. "The idea never crosses your mind to ask yourself whether you will make her happy, with your tastes and your habits, and your fine linen shirts. But since she is good enough to love you, I ask nothing better. Come, children, run to take the stiffness out of our limbs."

Hector and I enjoyed the next hour at Esquebesse's cottage as much as any part of the day. The dogs, hearing Esquebesse's voice, trotted down the lane in friendly fashion to meet us, and we all went together into the dark kitchen; then when Esquebesse had uncovered the ashes and thrown a bundle of dry vine-twigs on the smouldering hearth, he bade Hector blow up the fire and showed me the sideboard at the far end, where stood everything I needed for laying the table.

"It seems to me," he said, as he came back with a bottle in his hand from the closet which served him for cellar, "that we have no need of a Marie Anna. Here is my soup, which has been simmering all day by the hot ashes. We have eggs, we have honey, and

after supper you shall see if I cannot make hot wine with any housewife in the country."

And, indeed, it seems to me that I have never before, or since, drunk any hot wine so good. I always make it on Shrove Tuesday now for Grandmère from Esquebesse's recipe, but I think there must have been some virtue in the little yellow earthenware saucepan he used that night, or perhaps it was our appetite after the long drive, or perhaps the conversation with which he entertained us.

I had never thought, till I heard him talk, of what a lot of life there is in the woods ; but as I listened to him I saw them peopled with a thousand creatures whose very names I ignored ; and while he told Hector chiefly of the habits of birds and their enemies, the weasels and ferrets and stoats, a new world seemed to rise up around me—a world in the midst of which I had lived hitherto like one blind and deaf and dumb, knowing nothing of that which was taking place constantly under my eyes.

"Ah !" Esquebesse said, "if you do not take the trouble to watch them and to know their lives, and to extend your sympathies towards them, they are for you as if they did not exist. And it is the same thing, children, between human beings. There," he took his pipe out of his mouth and waved it comprehensively towards the walls of the cottage, "there we are

surrounded by millions of joys and sorrows and interests, but all rests with yourself. If you are content to remain with small knowledge and narrow sympathies, the world will be empty and dead to you."

I thought of what Dr. Charles had said of the mountains. It is a question of learning their language; and that night at all events, when Esquebesse lit his lantern and took us home through the woods, I did not feel as though we were alone. I felt as though we were walking through a crowd. The audible snoring of the owls seemed to me only one voice out of the millions which, had I known how to listen, I might have heard.

CHAPTER X.

THE happiness of the next few days was undisturbed, for me, by anything but the increasing soreness between Sœur Amélie and Hector. Hector's lessons were almost always badly done ; Sœur Amélie was, of course, almost always vexed with him. I saw that they did not like each other ; and this troubled me, for I was fond of Sœur Amélie. I had been accustomed to see her every day as long as I could remember, and she had been always kind to me, therefore I would have liked her to appreciate Hector ; and I would have liked Hector, too, to see that though she was not wise and great like some of the people he had perhaps been accustomed to in England, still she was good and nice in her way. He only said that people who knew nothing ought not to try and teach that nothing to others, because nobody wanted to learn it ; and all I could do was to try and make up a little to Sœur Amélie by learning my own

lessons extra well. I don't mean to say that I always did this, because I was not very fond of lessons, and Sœur Amélie vexed me so much sometimes by the way she talked to Hector, that I could not care to please her; but when I was feeling good, I tried as much as I could to keep her in good-humour by doing everything myself that I thought she would like, and that used to make her often far pleasanter to Hector. In this way we got on fairly well, and when she was not there Hector and I were so happy together that we scarcely thought about her.

"Zélie," Hector said one day, when he was sitting as usual on the kitchen doorstep with the 'Avicéptologie' open on his crossed knees, "do you think I am ingenious?"

"I think you might be ingenious if you liked," I said.

"And quick and active, and full of forethought; also dexterous and industrious and imaginative?"

"I don't know, Hector. That's a great deal to ask. Why do you want to know?"

"Because I want to be all that."

"It is very grand to aim so high," I said, with a sigh of admiration. "For quickness and activity and cleverness, I am sure you won't find it very difficult; but for forethought and industry, Hector, I don't know. You don't work hard."

"I don't work at stupid things," Hector said.
"But I could work if it were necessary."

"Yes, that I do believe," I exclaimed joyously. "If once you could make up your mind to work, I am sure you would be industrious. And it would be so charming, Hector; for then Sœur Amélie would not be annoyed, and she would see all your other good qualities."

"Because," Hector continued, without paying much attention to me, "unless I can become all these things, I shall never catch birds really well. You hear what this man says: 'The first and most essential of all the qualities a bird-catcher must have, is taste. Without it, it is impossible to insure success, and the chase becoming fruitless, is soon only irksome. Taste never exists without dexterity and industry, and these are the two qualities which lead necessarily to success.' And then again: 'It is also important that a bird-catcher should be ingenious, lively, active, and provident, and that his imagination should always be ready to come to his assistance, because——' I can't read you the reasons, they are too long, but you will see directly you begin to study the question in earnest, that without these qualities one couldn't hope to do any good. Patience, too. Yes, that one could learn. It is more the quickness and sharpness and ready imagination that bother me, because you can't make yourself clever if you are naturally stupid."

"But you can make yourself cleverer, I expect, if you are naturally a little bit clever," I hazarded. "That's why everybody works at everything."

"Is spinning easy?" asked Hector, looking up at my distaff, which since his admiration of Irma's industry I had kept more constantly in use.

"Oh yes, quite easy. Try."

He tried, but the tow came in lumps and would not twist, the spindle would not turn round in his unaccustomed fingers. Finally, he dropped it, and some of the yarn which I had already spun was unwound in a dirty puddle. That did not matter at all, for in a minute I had broken off the dirty piece and spun as much again in its place.

"It is only that you have never practised it," I said to Hector, "and it is not worth your while, for it is not boys' work. I was just as bad at first, but I made myself cleverer."

"Every one here is clever," Hector said; "even Madelon knows a lot of things. She can spin and weave and make wine, besides making bread and bacon, and all that a common cook knows how to do. As for Grandmère, she is the cleverest woman I have ever seen. If she was cast on a desert island, she would do everything that was wanted. She could sow and reap and grind, and cook the food; she could spin and weave, and cut out and make the

clothes. She knows all about building and tiling and thatching. She knows about draining land, and about doctoring sick people. I think she ought to be a queen."

I imagined Grandmère in her short grey dress and her shady hat and her wooden shoes, with her dear old withered brown face, sitting upon the throne of France, which I had always pictured to myself as being made of pure gold; and fond as I was of her, I could not help laughing.

"Queens are not like that, Hector," I said; "they are grand ladies, and beautiful and young."

"Well, they ought to be like that," he said, "so that they could be useful to their people. What's the good of grand ladies, beautiful and young, to be dressed out in silks and satins for a crowd to stare at? It would be much better if they could show people how to make good bread. I think what Esquebesse said, that real gentlemen and kings and queens ought to be the people who know most, and who do most for every one else. That's why I'm going to try and learn bird-catching. I don't know how to do one single thing, now, that's useful."

"But, Hector, you know we learn our lessons, and that will make us useful."

"If we did real sensible work, it would; little rubbish lessons, like ours, aren't any good. Nobody

would ever grow clever on that sort of stuff; but just, look at Esquebessé, how clever he is with going about in the woods, watching the animals and thinking as much as he likes."

I saw that Hector was as far as ever from working well for Sœur Amélie, and as she was at that moment coming up the lane, we dropped the subject. By the time she had reached the house Hector had disappeared, and a minute after I caught sight of him in the stable begging some hairs out of the horses' tails from Jean. He stumbled through his lessons that morning, however, without special difficulty, and in a couple of hours we were both of us free to study to our hearts' content the art of twisting horse-hairs for bird traps. It was in working like this with Hector that I first began to understand the pleasure of reading, for I saw how he got from books just what he wanted to know. The '*Avicéptologie*' told us exactly how many hairs to use for the cord of a snare; how to knot them together; how to hold them; how to twist them; how to finish them off when they were twisted; and also, alas, the manner and purpose of their use.

"I suppose a bird-catcher must kill birds," I said to Hector; and I saw by his answer that he had been thinking too upon this subject.

"He must kill them in these snares," he said; "but I don't intend to practise much with these. I shall

only use them once or twice, just to see if I can, and then I shall go on regularly with bird-calling. That will be as good for me, and as I sha'n't wring their necks when they come, the little extra exercise of trotting after me will do the birds no harm."

Immediately after dinner we escaped to the woods, and Hector began to set his snares. As a snare was nothing but a noose of horse-hair, of which one end was made fast in a branch, the only difficulty of setting them was to choose spots in the wood where birds were likely to pass. In order to do this, we had to watch the birds. Hector was very patient; he would lie for half-an-hour at a time in one spot absorbed by all that he saw and heard, and though my ear was never as quick as his to catch the different notes of the birds' songs, my eyes soon became practised, and I took almost as much pleasure as he in watching the strange and beautiful things that went on around us. It was thus that I first conceived the love of natural history which has been such a pleasure in my life. Hour after hour, as the summer went on, Hector and I used to lie side by side upon our stomachs listening and looking in different parts of the woods; and I cannot attempt to write down a fiftieth part of the wonderful things we saw. Insects, birds, flowers, animals, even the harmless kind of serpents, became interesting to us; and in the big

bookcase in the drawing-room, which I had never thought of opening, Hector discovered an old copy of M. Buffon's "Natural History," which told us most things that we wanted to know.

On this first day, however, we were very ignorant, and the only result of looking with all our eyes and listening with all our ears was to make us feel that the woods were a thousand times fuller than we had thought, and that it was impossible to take count of the movement which was going on there. There were numbers of birds twittering everywhere; therefore, after a time, we set six snares very much on chance, and then Hector said to me that we must find a bird's-nest.

"You are not going to take eggs, are you?" I asked.

"No!" he answered very shortly. "But I want another snare. Have you four more horse-hairs?"

I told him that I had, and he took them and knotted them together; then we hunted in the bushes for a nest. It was not long before we found one. It was built very nearly on the ground, amongst the chestnut shoots which were springing up from the root of an old stump. The mother-bird was sitting when we first discovered it; but, frightened at our intrusion, she flew away; and while she wheeled uneasily over our heads, we were able to examine at leisure the little semi-circular nest, carefully and elaborately woven of blades

of grass, and the five greyish-brown eggs which lay upon the warm, soft lining of the nest. The sun shining through the chestnut shoots threw light shadows across them, and I thought what a lovely little home it was for the male bird to come back to.

"Isn't she tiny," I said, "to have done all this? It seems impossible that two little birds should have the sense to build themselves such a beautiful home."

Hector did not answer. He had fastened some string to either end of his bit of twisted horse-hair, and he made one end secure to a chestnut branch at the back of the nest, then he made a loose knot in the horse-hair itself, and pulled it open with his fingers till the circle of it was about the size of the nest; this he laid upon the nest, and taking in his hand the long end of string which lay upon the ground, he signed to me to hide with him beneath a box-bush. The instant we were out of sight the uneasy mother-bird descended with a sudden drop upon her nest, and ceasing her little plaintive notes, seemed to swell with content to find all well as she nestled once more upon the eggs. I did not know what Hector meant to do, but I suspected something horrible, and my heart was beating fast with apprehension when I saw his arm suddenly move. Almost at the same instant there was a loud piteous tweak from the little nest, and as Hector rose, I saw that the string was drawn quite tight, and in the

noose formed by the horse-hair the bird hung by the neck quite dead.

"Oh, Hector!" I cried, "what have you done? It is cruel."

But I said no more. He looked even more upset than I. There was a flushed spot in each of his cheeks, and he stood with the string still in his hand, staring as though fascinated at his little victim. It was a brownish-yellow bird, with white and black stripings underneath, and the sun, which shone through the chestnut-twigs upon the warm eggs, shone too upon its pretty plumage, upon its relaxed legs and limp falling head, showing too plainly that already life was gone.

"I see it is true," he said. "I did not believe it was so easy."

I did not say anything, but went up to the nest to feel the eggs.

"I had to do it, Zélie," Hector said, after a little pause. "If I want to be a bird-catcher, I ought to try all ways."

I was only thinking that the eggs would never be hatched now. I could not speak.

"If I could kill the he-bird," Hector said, raising his head.

"Isn't it enough?" I asked, almost choking with a kind of anger to think he could be cruel.

"It is that, if I could kill the he-bird, he would

never know that she was dead first, and the eggs don't know they were to be hatched."

He seemed to understand what I meant, for his face was red all over, and his lip was quivering. I saw that whatever his reason was for killing the bird, he was not cruel and heartless, and I was ashamed of my disloyal suspicion. I did not tell him that, but when he came up to undo the string from the branch to which he had fastened it, and I saw that he could not see the knot because two big tears had gathered in his eyes, I could not help leaning over the nest and putting my arm round his neck.

"Let us go and bury it somewhere," I said; "and now that we know it can be done, we shall not need to take any more this way."

But we were not yet at the end of our troubles on account of that little bird.

We were standing still beside the nest, Hector with the bird and the string in his hand, when Irma came suddenly upon us.

She asked us first, in her bright cordial fashion, what we were doing; and then perceiving the nest and the strangled bird in Hector's hand, she divined what had happened, and burst out into reproaches against Hector.

"What you have done is very ill," she said. "You think, perhaps, that because you are only a boy, you may be cruel if you like; but it is not so. Boys who

have hearts amuse themselves certainly, sometimes, with catching birds, but they could not go and treacherously seize a poor mother brooding upon her eggs. It is not only her you have killed, but all those little ones; and look, there now is her mate flying home with food for the family you have destroyed." It was true; another bird of the same kind was wheeling above our heads, showing unmistakably by its movements on what spot it would descend.

"Ah! poor lark," Irma cried, holding out to it the dead body of its mate, "you will never see her again. You will never hear her voice of welcome. Keep your food, there is no one at home to need it."

"Is it a lark?" Hector asked.

"Yes, it is a lark, and you are a horribly cruel boy," Irma replied with a burst of anger, which even then, children as we were, we understood to be in some measure greater, because it was Georges' bird that Hector had killed. "But, tenez, you will suffer for it all the same, for those who have no heart do not enjoy life. They make others miserable, and they are contemptible themselves."

She spoke with so much passion that the tears started to her eyes; then, perhaps because she did not want us to see, she walked on quickly and left us by the nest.

Hector stood looking at the dead bird in his hand.

“I think there must be somebody without much heart who is making her unhappy now,” I said; “she was crying when she went away, and she would not have been so angry only for the bird.”

“She might have been so angry for the cruelty,” Hector said. And indeed it seemed as though that was the case, for we had not gone much farther before we met Esquebese, and found that Irma had told him the story with an indignation which had in some measure communicated itself to him. He also spoke strongly to Hector of the cruelty of killing a brooding bird.

“If it is only to carry trouble and confusion to innocent beings, who are fulfilling the duties Nature has imposed on them, that you spend your time in the woods, you would do better to confine yourself to the high-road,” he said. “To understand Nature you must love it. If you would enter into the life of the woods, put all thought of your own profit out of your mind; leave selfishness in the towns, and on the roads, where men pass up and down. There it is perhaps needed. But in the woods there is no competition for man, no one wants to pass beyond him, no one occupies themselves with the thought of him; he may forget himself altogether. Without selfishness, neither greed nor cruelty exist. The heart, if you let it, will expand here naturally among the works of God; but

if you bring selfishness with you, you cover yourself as it were with a shell which shuts you out from all true fellowship with Nature. It is very fine to love knowledge; all intelligent beings must necessarily love it. Listen to all the living sounds of the woods, and get well into your little head that there is a lesson beyond all others which they will teach you, if you can learn it,—that is, to respect the lives of others.”

I have known since how Esquebesse carried out his maxim, and how his lonely existence was guided by respect for the lives and happiness of others. But even then his slow and thoughtful sentences impressed both me and Hector, and we went away very gravely to bury the bird Hector had killed. For a long time after that, if I felt inclined to be selfish, the remembrance of the cold eggs in the nest and the desolate he-bird, used to come between me and my inclination, and Esquebesse's simple “respect the lives of others,” has made me act kindly very often since, when without the thought of it I might have been unkind.

After we had buried the bird, we went with some fear to visit our snares. We neither of us said anything, but I am sure Hector hoped with all his heart, as I did, that there might be nothing in them. It was not till we had arrived at the place where they were set that we remembered, for the first time, the very important necessity of baiting them. Naturally, as we

had put nothing to entice the birds into them, they were all in exactly the condition in which they had been left; and Hector's face began to brighten as with much alacrity we took them down.

"It is not the season to set snares now," he said. "I had forgotten that all the birds we took in them would be mothers or fathers, with young ones waiting for them at home. We won't try them any more till the autumn or winter."

This resolution cheered us both considerably; but we found, to my regret, when we reached the house, that the story of, as it was now called, Hector's want of heart, had preceded us. Grandmère received us after her own fashion with a vigorous—

"Ah! it is pretty to go out in this fine sunshine to kill mothers of families. *Fi donc*, Monsieur Hector, I should have thought you had more heart."

Sœur Amélie, who was there, shook her head and looked solemn, and asked how he would like to have that kind of thing done to himself, and whether he did not know that cruelty was a sin? Madelon even must needs say her say as usual, and she jeered at the fine hunter who killed his brooding birds. But Hector did not seem to pay the least attention to any of them. He only looked absently in front of him while they talked, and slipped away almost immediately to the drawing-room, where I found him a

minute or two afterwards sitting at the foot of the old bookcase absorbed in *M. Buffon*.

Grandmère heard us there, and came in. "No, no," she said, "no indulgences for people who permit themselves to be selfish. The drawing-room is not for children. Shut the shutter."

Hector got up, with a strange white, tired look on his face, and, without asking if he might take the book elsewhere, he replaced it in the bookshelf and left the room. I saw Grandmère look curiously after him, and I longed to tell her that he was not obstinate or hard-hearted, but I did not dare.

The granaries were open that day, and five minutes later Hector was singing at the top of his voice as he worked away with a wooden spade, helping the men to fill some sacks with wheat.

We saw him from the kitchen through the open doors above the stable, standing by a great brown heap of wheat, in his long-sleeved blue pinafore, with his ruddy hair all standing out in disorder round his head, and his face bright with the unwonted exercise.

"There is one," said Madelon, "who doesn't put himself out for what people say."

"It is greatly to be feared——" *Sœur Amélie* was beginning, when Grandmère almost simultaneously answered Madelon.

“Well, and what would you have him do—go and whimper in a corner because we say to him a few sharp words which he deserves? *Ma foi!* it is a funny doctrine, and I prefer a little more activity.”

Sœur Amélie said no more to Grandmère; but I am sure she talked to other people, for, from that day, I could see that Hector had everywhere the reputation of being heartless.

It used to make me angry to hear the neighbours say that the English were always cold-hearted; but it is difficult to silence people's tongues, or to make them think what you would like them to think of those you love.

In one way, however, this only drew me closer to Hector; for I think there is nothing which binds you so close to any one as to be in the secret of his goodness.

CHAPTER XI.

AFTER the affair of the lark, Irma seemed to take quite a dislike to Hector, and as she came up to Salaret twice every day to fetch her milk, she soon showed it enough for him to see, as well as I, what she felt. It did not make a bit of difference to his admiration for her ; he continued to like her just as much, and to think her as pretty as he had always thought her ; and he used to hang about the yard and talk to her almost always when she came up to the house. I think her short answers and her rebuffs hurt him, because I used to see the same white, tired look on his face sometimes that I had seen the day Grand-mère sent him out of the drawing-room ; but he never told me that they did, or gave any hint that he noticed her manner to him, except by just occasionally talking about himself as a kind of boy you couldn't expect people to care for much.

We stuck to our resolution of setting no more

snare in the spring-time, and Hector continued day after day to practise bird-calls down in the woods, till he could at last imitate the cry of the lark and one or two others almost as well as Georges himself. I had not his ear or his voice, neither should I ever have had the patience to go on trying as he did, day after day, so I did not attempt to learn the bird-calls; but it was a great delight to both of us to find that he really was succeeding. We certainly carried out the instructions of Monsieur B——, the unknown author of the "*Avicéptologie*," for we spent the greater part of our time in the woods studying constantly the cries of the birds, and Hector endeavoured, as he was told, to follow their example punctually. We learned, sooner than I should have thought possible, to distinguish between their cries of joy, their cries of alarm, and the songs with which they rejoiced in peace; and often, as we sat together listening on a chestnut stump, I used to amuse Hector by making up whole stories out of the different cries we heard uttered and answered. Grandmère did not mind how long we stayed out of doors, for I always took my spinning with me, and in ordinary seasons there was nothing special for Hector to do at the farm. She fancied, I believe, that we always stayed in the wood near the house; but we did not really, for there was a particular kind of couch-grass which Hector wanted very much

for making whistles to imitate the cry of the owl, and we roamed through all the woods in the neighbourhood in the hope of finding it. We never succeeded in finding exactly the sort which the author of the "*Avicetologie*" recommended, but we found two or three other kinds, and in our search after it became by degrees acquainted with a great many of the grasses and flowers of our woods which I, at least, should probably never have known had it not been for Hector's activity.

In these rambles too we used often to meet Dr. Charles of Portalouve, and he always took some kindly notice of us. He interested himself in our search after the couch-grass, and in fact joined in it, for he too was constantly hunting for specimens of our native plants. Whenever we met we used to ask news of each other of the couch-grass, and he used to look at the flowers we had gathered and tell us about them. Then, too, he was often hungry and far away from his dinner, and he used to delight us by simply accepting half of the bread and garlic, or curd cheese, with which we were generally provided. I have known since that his mother used to be vexed that he, whose parents were so well to do, should wander about the country like a poor man trusting to the chance of finding himself near some little country inn to eat; but he never was able to remember those things for him-

self, and it used to make us very happy to meet him, and have the chance of dividing our goûter into three parts instead of two. We always took care that his part should be the largest, and he used often to see that, and laugh and say, "Nevertheless, I accept; I am hungrier than you;" and then we could almost have hugged him for pleasure.

One day we were all three sitting on a heap of stones by the roadside, eating bread and garlic, with a great bundle of faded flowers, and the specimen box and my distaff lying in the dust beside us, when a handsome carriage rolled slowly past, in which was one little shrivelled old man. He was wrapped up in a great-coat and scarf, though the day was so warm that we had been freely wiping our faces with our handkerchiefs just before he came up; and when he saw Dr. Charles he stopped the carriage.

"I know it is folly, Doctor, for me to be out," he said in a thin, quavering voice, "but they told me my voice might be useful in the elections to the Conseils Généraux, and they dragged me from my chimney corner."

"There is no harm in that, monsieur; to move about a little will do you good. And how go the elections?"

"Badly, as badly as they can go. I knew it beforehand, and I told them it was useless to disturb our-

selves. What is the voice of a gentleman nowadays? Worse than nothing amidst the common herd which takes pleasure in voting against him. I saw to-day, in the voting-hall a man who used to be my gardener, who is now a member of the town council, and whose vote is worth as much as mine. They say even that he has influence, and that the greater part of the town council votes with him. The elections have become a farce. I will occupy myself with them no more. May God watch over our unhappy country."

Dr. Charles was looking very thoughtful.

"I dare not believe, monsieur, that He will not abandon us," he replied, gravely.

"What I wanted to speak to you about, Doctor, was that last medicine you sent me," continued the quavering voice. "It is not strong enough. I begin to think now that I need a tonic."

"Tonics only serve to augment an evil, unless the system has been prepared to receive them," Dr. Charles replied, in the same thoughtful tone as before.

"Then for Heaven's sake prepare my system," the old gentleman answered, impatiently; and Dr. Charles seemed to wake up into sudden laughter, as he replied:

"That's not so easy, monsieur, as at first sight it may seem."

A few more remarks were made about the medicine, and exercise, and a wholesome diet, and the carriage drove on, leaving Dr. Charles still half thoughtful, half amused.

Hector had stood listening to the dialogue.

"Is that one of your French aristocracy?" he asked, as the carriage drove away.

"Exactly. That is M. le Comte, of whom you must have heard Esquebesse speak."

We all sat down and applied ourselves again to our bread and garlic in silence, till presently Hector's eye fell on the bundle of flowers in the road. "Suppose some giant collector was looking out for specimens of men and women," he said, "and he happened to pick up M. le Comte, wouldn't he think we were a queer little lot, and wouldn't he be pretty well puzzled, too, to know how all the things in the world got done?"

"Ay, indeed," Dr. Charles said. "And the same thing is but too true of many of our gentlemen of the old blood. They need a tonic badly, but who is to prepare their system?"

"Is it idleness," Hector asked, "that makes them what they are?"

"Esquebesse would tell you that idleness is at the bottom of most evils, for idleness is pretty sure to bring self-indulgence, and self-indulgence brings selfishness. Esquebesse has too much heart ever to have

worked for himself alone, therefore he thinks there is safety in work ; but I have seen industrious men only the more selfish because they have worked hard for themselves. They gratify their own wants so well, that they forget there are any other wants in the universe."

Hector listened in the eager way in which he always did to anything which exercised his mind.

"Yes," he said at once, "but he grinds the corn and people eat it, so that even if he doesn't care to be of use he is of use. That's better than a selfish gentleman."

I knew, of course, that he was thinking of the miller, and what he said made me begin to think in my own heart that perhaps it was better not to be a gentleman, since a working-man had only to be honest and respectable in order to be of some use, and a gentleman might so easily be of no use at all.

But Dr. Charles seemed interested by Hector's eagerness.

"Yes," he said, "if we except a selfish lady," he patted my head kindly as he spoke, as though to show that he did not think me selfish, "a selfish gentleman is perhaps what there is of worst in the human species, for the same position which gives him advantages for himself, makes him necessarily an example and leader to many other people. The power of the cultivated

man is very great. If he teaches nothing but selfishness he betrays his trust, and probably does, if we could calculate it, a great deal more harm than the ruffian who cuts his neighbour's throat for the sake of a few gold coins. On the other hand, we must remember this: that if the power of the cultivated is enormous, it is great for good as well as for evil. Putting on one side the great deeds of history for which heroes have been found in all ranks, we have only to look round us honestly in any civilized country, and we see worthy and devoted gentlemen doing good which the poor and uncultivated, however well disposed, could never hope to achieve. There are gentlemen who do not cultivate themselves, then they or their children soon drop from the rank of their forefathers, and are lost in the mass of the uneducated. There are among the poor some who have the energy and the power to cultivate themselves; these rise, either in their own persons or the persons of their children, to the rank of gentlemen. I make no hard-and-fast line of aristocratic descent, but I call the mass of the rich and the cultivated gentlemen, and I maintain that in all civilized countries this great mass is doing, on the whole, enormous good. If you belong to it by birth, I would say hold on to it by every means in your power. Never abandon the possibilities for good with which you have been endowed. If you do not

belong to it by birth, strive to rise towards it—try to win a place for your children in the upper half of humanity. Knowledge and riches are an immense power. Men ought to be powerful; and I would no more advise the ploughman to be content to remain ignorant and half brutalized, than I would advise the gentleman to be content to live on the reputation of his father's deeds. As for me, I respect what is above me, and my idea is that we should all go higher together. After that, I am only a little middle-class doctor, and the idea of our aristocracy seems unfortunately to be that we should all go lower together. M. le Comte, you see, is not only determined to take no more interest in the elections himself, but he is angry that his gardener should take an interest in them either. Such things, Hector, when you see them in high places, are sad, but they bring home more and more the lesson that every man should set it before himself as an aim to add something to the knowledge and advantages of his fathers."

There was something in Hector, I think, which made people talk to him in this way. He took so much interest in everything that went on round him, that he scarcely seemed at times like a child. People seemed to take pleasure in telling him their real thoughts, and I, going about always with him and listening to his talks, got to know our nearer neighbours

more intimately in a month or two with him than in all the years I had lived amongst them alone. This talk with Dr. Charles has remained in my memory, because it was, I think, the first thing which made me begin to feel myself what Hector felt—that we had special duties, because we were born in what Dr. Charles called the upper half of mankind. I had always thought before that it was very lucky for me that Grandmère wasn't poor, like some of the peasants about Salaret, who had to keep their children at work all day, and feed them chiefly on chestnuts like the pigs, and I had even wondered sometimes why I should have been so favoured; but now I began to understand the balance of things, and to see that if I had better I ought also to do better.

Dr. Charles said more than I have repeated about the use and power of cultivation. He told us, just as Esquebesse had done, how knowledge opened the heart, and made men feel the joys and sorrows of other people. He told us how much the poor people everywhere needed knowledge, and how much the rich were able, when they chose, to give it to them; and after this day I never was inclined to think any more, as Hector had sometimes made me think, that perhaps it was better not to be a gentleman: I saw that the best was to be a gentleman, and a good gentleman.

As Dr. Charles and Hector and I were going back

towards Salaret that day, we met Irma bringing her little brothers and sisters home from the infant school. They were all so small, that as she walked amongst them with her distaff raised, she reminded us of the goose-girls when they drive their flocks through the stubble-fields after the corn has been cut; and Dr. Charles said to her, laughingly, as we met—

“You are bringing back all your little geese quite safe, Irma.”

“Yes, yes, *Monsieur le Docteur*,” she replied, with her old bright smile, “and the Sisters tell me that they are good little geese, especially this one.” She laid her hand kindly as she spoke on a little bullet head which reached but a short way above her knee, and received an affectionate rub in answer from the proud object of her praise. “That big one there is beginning to read words of two syllables. He can answer his questions nicely in his *Histoire Sainte*, and he can count well now. This one,” and the hand went down again to the tiny creature at her knee, “can count up to ten, and sings like a little choir-boy.”

“The big one there” was not seven yet; and “this one” was between two and three. There were five altogether, and Irma looked at them so proudly and affectionately, that Dr. Charles said—

“Why, Irma, to see you so pleased with them, one might think they were your own.”

"*Hé!* Monsieur le Docteur : they are as good as mine, since they are my brothers and sisters, and we must hold together. Without that, what would become of the family? Heaven knows, I ask nothing better than to work hard and do my share towards maintaining them. But there are sacrifices before which one draws back."

Her face had grown grave while she was speaking.

We did not understand what she meant, but Dr. Charles seemed to understand, for he said warmly and kindly—

"At least, Irma, you have the sympathy of all people of heart, for when such sacrifices are not necessary no one can wish to see them made; especially if they involve the happiness of more than one person."

The last words brought the colour so vividly back to Irma's cheeks, that without knowing quite what the sacrifice she spoke of could be, Hector and I were at once sure it had something to do with Georges.

"Thank you, monsieur," she said. "You do me good. When one is alone, and then duty seems to put itself on the other side, it is hard sometimes to keep up one's resolution. Voyons, Jeanne, say 'Bonjour, monsieur et compagnie.'"

Jeanne looked very shy for a moment, but as Irma insisted on the greeting, and the other children said it

boldly in chorus, Jeanne made her little curtsy to Dr. Charles.

"*Bonjour, monsieur,*" she said ; then to Hector, with another curtsy, "*Bonjour compagnie.*" And while we all laughed at the dignity to which Hector was raised, Irma caught her up in her arms and carried her away with a hearty kiss.

We children longed to know what the sacrifice for her brothers and sisters, of which she had spoken, could possibly be. We would have given a good deal to ask Dr. Charles, but though we chattered to him quite freely about many things, we did not dare to ask him this, and it was not till he had left us that we gave our whole mind to conjectures upon the matter. The great secret seems to me now so simple, that I hardly know how we could help guessing it ; but notwithstanding Hector's readings in his uncle's library, we were quite ignorant of such affairs, and the little brothers and sisters puzzled us completely. How Irma could be in any way called upon to sacrifice herself for them was a wonderful mystery to us, and our guesses were wide of the mark till it struck me one day that we might go to the forge and ask Pierre. He would know, we felt sure, and we were not shy with him. He did know, and after assuring us that the matter could not interest us, and that children could not possibly understand such things, he told us that Lagrace was poor,

and found it hard to bring up his large family, and that there was an offer of a rich marriage for Irma with a middle-aged man, who was willing to take her without a marriage portion. Irma stuck still to Georges, but her parents told her it was her duty to think of her family, and that it was unnatural to think more of Georges, who was a stranger, than of the little brothers and sisters, who were her own flesh and blood. Every one blamed her, Pierre said, for resisting her parents' wishes ; but when our hearts were beating fast with excitement over the story, and our hopes for Georges were very low, Pierre cheered us by the declaration that he, at all events, did not blame her. To his mind, he said, it was an abominable crime to take her from Georges and give her, all young and generous and pretty as she was, to a great clumsy fellow, old enough to be her father, who had never even suspected that there is anything else to do in the world but to fill one's own stomach and amass gold pieces.

It is easy to imagine how indignantly we two echoed Pierre's opinion. Hector's astonished disgust knew no bounds, and Pierre said it did him good to talk to us ; that only children remained natural now-a-days. Hector would have liked to go straight away and tell Georges what they were doing. Pierre told him that that would be no use, for poor people were not like the

rich ; they had to sit still often and be patient, no matter what fretted their hearts. Georges could not leave his regiment, and it would only make him miserable to know what Irma was suffering. But for the poor as for the rich, Pierre said " there is the justice of God, and we shall see yet if courage and good faith will not triumph over avarice and selfishness."

CHAPTER XII.

FROM this time the affair of George and Irma occupied our thoughts a great deal. But, as Irma had said, people were too busy in the summer months to think about getting married, and we heard nothing more of it for a long time.

The hay was cut, the cherry harvest had come and gone, the granaries at Salaret were filled again almost to bursting, and the worst heats of summer were over, when one Saturday afternoon Hector and I were down, as usual, at the forge.

Except on the Saturdays when Grandmère took us to Cassagne, we hardly ever failed to spend part of that afternoon with Pierre. He called it his reception day. His friends were the peasants, and merchants, and pedlars, and tramps, who passed to and from the market, and though they gave him many a job as they went, it was not only for the pleasure of seeing Pierre work, that we used to go on

Saturdays to the forge. It was for the fun of hearing the gossip, and seeing the people pass by. I have thought since then that Pierre's Saturday reception was to us what newspapers are to grown-up people, with the difference that we got our news alive. He was such a general favourite that no one would have passed the forge without stopping to tell any interesting piece of gossip they knew, and the common remarks of those who had nothing to tell, showed what subjects occupied people's thoughts. The crops in their various seasons, the weather, the goose fattening, the election, all formed in their turn the basis of Saturday conversation, and we used to think, then, it was a funny charm which made everyone speak of the same thing. If the farmer's wife from the nearest farm said, as she passed, "Good day, M. Pierre. What a wind for the orchards ; the ground was strewn with little pears under my big pear-tree this morning," then we knew that everyone who went by would tell us of the damage done to his orchard by the wind that night. And Pierre on his side would repeat from one to the other what each had suffered, till anything interesting, such as the blowing down of a tree or the striking of a branch by lightning, was known to all the parishes of the neighbourhood.

As people trudged in laden in the early part of the day, they seldom stopped to talk ; but if Pierre hap-

pened to stand at the door of the forge, each gave some such bit of personal news as he went, and received two words in answer. It was in the afternoon that Hector and I loved to hang about the door. Then, as the merry groups clattered home with empty baskets, the girls and boys in their smart market clothes, rejoicing to be rid of their loads, and heads of families looking content to have the day's gain stowed away in some safe inner pocket, everyone was disposed to dawdle, and all the stories of the market were repeated to us with comments and variations. Personal anecdotes and gossip were mingled then with business talk about seed-time and harvest, and Hector and I scarcely knew whether we enjoyed most to listen to the circle on the threshold of the forge, or to climb the mound at the opposite side of the road and look out for our friends as they came. We used to try which of us could recognize them best at a great distance on the road, and though we sometimes made funny mistakes, there were people whom we always knew. Irma Lagrace was one. She used to walk so straight, and look so slim and neat in the sunshine which streamed through the poplars, that we never mistook her for any of the other girls of the neighbourhood, and her dark red skirt and white capeline made one of the spots of colour for which we used to look with the greatest interest; Dr. Charles's carriage with the yellow

horse ; Esquebesse and his dogs were very welcome too ; but I think that our chief delight on Saturdays was to see Baptiste, the miller, go by. He had a heavy old horse who used to canter with his head down between his fore legs, and, though Baptiste had been pulling him for nearly twenty years, he had never succeeded in pulling his head up. So they went by fighting with each other every week, Baptiste bumping up and down in the saddle with the two white bags in which he brought home what he wanted from market, flying out on either side, his blouse filled with wind, and his face like a full-blown peony. He looked always so heavy and awkward and hot, that we who did not care for him used to get a great deal of amusement out of the contrast between his figure and that of his little old servant Marie Anna, who went by every Saturday, too, on a donkey, with a big basket over her arm, looking so immovable in her saddle, that she and the donkey and the basket might all have been made of wood ; and who never failed to call out in her shrill, hard voice :

“ Has the miller passed this way ? ”

On the particular Saturday of which I speak, people were very late in returning from the market ; the afternoon was wearing on, and we were still inside the forge, when we heard the voice of Marie Anna calling out as usual to know if the miller had yet passed by.



"WE HEARD THE VOICE OF MARIE ANNA CALLING OUT AS USUAL TO KNOW
IF THE MILLER HAD YET PASSED BY." P. 164.

Pierre went out upon the threshold.

"Not a living soul has passed since dinner-time," he said. "They have had enough, no doubt, of the great heat, and are waiting for the cool of the evening." But we saw, while he spoke, that the stream of home-comers had set in, for the road so empty before was covered now with moving groups.

"That's it," grumbled Marie Anna, "everything passes now before work. The weather is warm ; there is news at the market, and no matter what becomes of the work, so long as we take our ease like princes. It is time for these things to finish ; my master is losing his head."

"There is news at the market ?" Pierre asked, and we children opened our ears for Marie Anna's answer.

"They speak of nothing but the soldiers," she replied. "It seems we are to have five or six thousand of them on our backs before long, stuffing themselves with our provisions, and helping themselves without Yes or No to all that there is of best in the country. Ah, I know what it is. They will pass like a pest. After them will come desolation. I have seen it. And over there, at the market, they are rejoicing like children because it is new." She spoke with all the contempt of experience for the ignorant, and we thought that the miller would have to be braver than he looked if he ventured to rejoice with her eye upon him.

"It is settled, then," said Pierre. "The soldiers come decidedly. And when must we expect to see them?"

"Next month, just in the middle of the vintage. Six thousand of them to be quartered off and on for a month in this arrondissement of two thousand inhabitants. Think if we shall have them into our very lofts; and think what will remain to us of our crops after they are gone."

"*Allons*, Marie Anna. We mustn't judge them beforehand. As for me, you know I have my nephew Georges in the army, and for his sake the soldiers shall be well received in my house."

Georges's return had been our first thought when we heard the news, and we were radiant already. But Marie Anna was not to be appeased.

"Much they will care," she croaked, "how they are received. It is the first time we have had such an occupation since you have known how to understand things, but I know. I have a good memory. I do not forget. They will pass like grasshoppers; nothing will remain to us. The English themselves were not so bad as the French."

"Bah! we are not in time of war now. War changes the natures of men; but our soldiers are good. *Que diable!* They are the sons and the brothers and the nephews of people like ourselves,

and when they come in tired and footsore and hungry, and see there before them the master of the house, who bids them welcome, and pours them out a draught of good little white wine, they will say to themselves, 'Tiens ! it is like our father, or our brother, or our uncle, down there at home ;' they will drink to his health, and they will be ashamed to do anything in his house which they would not do in the house of their own relations."

One or two other people had come up, and there was a murmur of assent to what Pierre said, only Marie Anna remained unconvinced, and Pierre continued :

"When you saw soldiers here it was in time of war. Instead of saying to themselves, we shall soon return into our villages, and we shall be ashamed if we have done things that are disgraceful, they said to themselves: 'We are going into battle to be killed for something we don't care about at all. We have to give up our homes, and our families, and everything our hearts cling to. Then let us be merry and enjoy what we can take. It is only just for others to suffer in their turn.' Everyone can't be a hero, and despair makes monsters of men. Also after having killed men for duty, after having seen oneself splashed with human blood, after having marched over the bodies of your comrades, without paying attention to anything but the order of your commander to close up the ranks, your

moral ideas are so upset, that a little robbery and violence seems of small account. Manœuvres in time of peace are quite another thing. Then the soldier is a good honest fellow, who follows his trade like one of ourselves. And why should he exercise himself in arms? why should he sweat under the marches and counter-marches, which you will see when they are here? why should he have always under his eyes the possibility that he will hear one day, 'War is declared,' and will be sent with his pouch full of cartridges to fight upon our frontier? Why? That he may defend us, that we good *bourgeois* of Cassagne may sleep in our beds tranquil, and say to ourselves, 'If the invader comes, the army is there; the soldiers will give their lives for us.'"

The little circle had grown wider round the door of the forge, and Pierre's words were received with a sort of acclamation.

"That's it, Pierre. You are right. We must think of that," rose in murmurs from one side and the other. And more than one mother whose son's life had been given, drew a brown hand across her eyes, and declared that for her part the soldiers were welcome.

I could see that Hector was listening eagerly, and I felt much excited. Young as I had been at the time of the war, I remembered still the terrible scenes of desolation, when mothers and fathers came up to Sala-

ret, to tell Grand'mère of the death of their children; I remembered, too, to have seen Grandmère weep at the news of a great battle that was lost, and I felt for the moment, while Pierre was speaking, that I would have given everything I possessed to the soldiers. I think Hector felt something like that too, for his eyes glowed as he stood with his gaze rivetted on Pierre; then, when Pierre had finished speaking, he looked with a sort of curious interest at the hard peasant faces, moved as they were with generous thoughts, and said to me, "I would like to be a soldier." Esquebesse made one of the circle to which Pierre had spoken, and he said :

"What you say, Pierre, is very true. The French soldier does not serve for his own profit. All that he gets from the nation, besides his food and his clothes and his tobacco, is one little sou a day, and since for that he gives us everything, we need not grudge him once in a way a share of our good things. The billeting orders are that each officer is to have a room to himself, and the soldiers shelter and straw, and a place to light their fire, but we will receive them better than that. Everyone will do according to his means, and, for my part, so long as there is wine in the cellar, and vegetables in the garden, those who are billeted on me shall find their wine and their soup ready for them every day."

The hospitable feeling once expressed, seemed to spring up in all hearts, and everyone agreed that to give the soldiers their wine and soup was the least that those who could afford it might do.

Hector whispered to me that Irma and her father had joined the group, and we looked at Irma with joy and congratulation in our faces, but she did not see us. She was listening with moist eyes and a bright spot of colour in each cheek. While expressions of sympathy were arising on all sides, mixed with declarations that in the neighbourhood of Cassagne the soldiers should not want, Baptiste the miller cantered up.

"Well," he said. "It is lucky for us that the splendid summer has ripened all the crops early. We shall get in the maize without loss. But, in spite of the fine weather, it is a bad look-out for those whose wealth is in vines."

"Why so?" asked one or two whose vineyards were well known.

"Why? Because if those rascals of soldiers are to be here in the first week of October, you must begin to cut the grapes at once, otherwise you will make no wine this year."

"There is what I said," murmured Marie Anna.

"He has some good sense in spite of all."

"Do you suppose they will respect property?" Bap-

tiste went on. "Not they; they will help themselves to what they like. After their passage the gardens and vineyards will be as bare as my hand. This is what comes of your good-for-nothing Republican government. With all their talk about peace, they bind on our backs military burdens we never had before. But the soldiers whom they quarter on me shall not desire to return, I promise you that."

Baptiste was evidently out of temper; his words fell like a chill on the enthusiasm of the little assembly. Faces which a minute before had been looking tender and generous, became suddenly careworn and hard again. People turned somewhat anxiously towards him, and no one answered till Esquebesse took his pipe out of his mouth and said quietly :

"They will not touch the vines. Government has taken strong measures to prevent damages."

I learnt then how true it is that there are two sides to every question. Before Baptiste came up, everyone seemed to agree with Pierre, and to wish to be generous to the soldiers. Now that Baptiste advised them to be selfish, a number seemed suddenly to change round to his view, and to think it best to be selfish, as he said. Irma's father was one of them.

"For my part," he said, "I am of the opinion of the miller. What is happening to us is a misfortune from which we shall take a long time to recover. Why

should we stint our children to give wine and soup to soldiers? Already to have them here is ruin enough, and as for me, I will give nothing but what the law obliges."

Irma flushed, but a woman who had spoken of her boys in the army, cried out :

"It is all one. They are our sons, and we owe them something. Especially you, M. Lagrace. You have young sons ; their turn will come, and one day you will be glad if you can think in your heart, '*Eh bien !* when I had the chance, I did what I could for the soldiers.'"

The discipline of the *métairie* would have forbidden Irma to say a word in answer to her father, but this woman seemed to express just what Irma felt, for the flush of vexation faded partially away, and there came a bright grateful look into her eyes.

"I don't think, papa," she ventured, "that Valentin or Maurice will ever be good-for-nothings or robbers."

Her voice was so low and sweet after the loud argumentative tones, that all eyes turned towards her. But her father seemed vexed, and answered sharply :

"Do me the pleasure to be silent. It is not for the children to mix themselves up with affairs which concern their fathers. Yes," he continued, sarcastically, "the young girls who think of nothing but dressing themselves up smart, and running out to see the grand

parades, and to hear the military masses, will welcome the soldiers, but their parents have a little more foresight. They know what it is to have their vineyards stripped, and their poultry robbed, and their gardens ravaged. They know that they will pay dearly for a few grand sights. And it won't be the young girls who will sing, either, after the soldiers are gone. Those who respect themselves will remain close in their fathers' houses, and will think rather of the misfortune of their parents than of their own pleasure."

Irma dropped her eyes quietly to her knitting while her father was speaking, but when he had finished, and the miller from his place of elevation on the horse's back called out:

"That's it. The women should show the soldiers we don't want them in the country."

She flashed up at him such a glance of dislike, that Hector and I saw plainly she shared our feeling against the fat egoist.

The arguments for and against the soldiers could not go on for ever. People had to be moving home. So after Pierre and Esquebessé had said a little more in their favour, and the miller a good bit more against them, the little circle round the forge broke up, and group after group went away through the lengthening shadows, to spread in their various villages the great news that the soldiers were coming.

As Irma and her father were moving away, we noticed with some excitement that Hector's tramp, who seemed to find profit in passing up and down this particular road, had been listening on the outskirts of the little crowd.

"Ah ! you are perfectly right," he said to the miller, who had dismounted, and was walking beside Lagrace. "You will see queer things when the soldiers are here. I know them, I."

Then Irma's repressed irritation burst suddenly out, and, turning upon him, she said, with a sort of fury, before the miller had time to speak :

"What can you know about good people? You are a scoundrel ; go away."

After that she walked on fast towards the farm alone, knitting swiftly as she went, with the hot colour flaming in her cheeks.

As for us, our excitement was beyond words. After having thought at first only of Georges, we had now taken in the great fact that in another week or two the country would be swarming with soldiers, if everyone were to have them in their houses, we also should have some at Salaret, and, after watching the last group leave the forge, we ran home up the lane, bursting with anxiety to tell Grandmère the great news, and to find out how she meant to receive our soldiers.

CHAPTER XIII.

FOR the next few days we could think of nothing else but soldiers. Grandmère entered to a great extent into our feelings; and, though she smiled at our enthusiasm, and declared herself too old now to be excited about new things, she patted my head and said that she liked to see my cheeks burning, for generous blood was easily stirred when it was young. She soon set our hearts at rest as to the manner in which she meant to receive her soldiers, for, the very first evening, when we ran home fresh from the discussion at the forge and repeated all we could remember, she said that Pierre and Esquebesse had spoken well, and she had declared, before Jean and Madelon and one or two farm labourers, that any of the métayers who wished to obtain favour from her, would do well to receive the soldiers hospitably. In the course of the next day, some of the métayers came up to Salaret to ask what she thought about cutting the

grapes, and her answer to the first made us perfectly happy. People would do what they liked, she said, about their own grapes, but she hoped that she might never see the day when the vintage began on her land before the second week in October. In the good old times when she was young, the grapes were never cut till the first frost had touched them, and fires had to be lit in the vineyards to warm the hands of the grape-cutters. People had grown soft since then ; she gave in to custom so far as to let her vintage begin in the middle of October, and the wine was none the better for it. A day sooner it should not begin if all the armies in France were going to march over her vineyards. Moreover, for the benefit of such *métayers* as had grapes of their own, over which she had no control, she very frankly expressed her opinion that those who had not the courage and good faith to await in patience the proper seasons, but tried to snatch gifts from the hand of God before His own time came for bestowing them, were likely to suffer for their greediness.

We children remembered to have heard Pierre say almost the same words about Georges' and Irma's love-affair ; and, hearing Grandmère say them now, we hoped the more for Irma. Sœur Amélie did not take the same view as Grandmère of the soldiers. It was the duty of everyone, she said, to receive them

properly ; but she used to lament in mysterious half-sentences the terrible misfortunes which the soldiers would bring upon the country, the wickedness they would introduce, the ruin and misery they would leave behind ; till, one day, when we were all standing at the door of the kitchen after lessons, and she had been angering Hector and me by talking as though soldiers were, one and all, messengers of Satan, Hector said, in his quiet matter-of-fact way :

“ I suppose you haven’t ever been in love with a soldier, have you, *ma Sœur* ? ”

“ *Mon Dieu ! Mon Dieu !* ” exclaimed *Sœur Amélie* ; “ what questions to come into a child’s mind. Positively he is possessed. I, a sister of charity, to —— But it is frightful ! Did anyone ever hear such things spoken of ? ”

She took out her handkerchief and wiped her face, and *Grandmère* said :

“ There, there, *ma Sœur* ! the child meant no harm ; he doesn’t understand these things. ”

Hector went stolidly on :

“ Because, if you had ever been in love with a soldier, you’d understand much better about them being good, and you’d be longing for them to come too, and turning red, like other people, when you heard them spoken of, and looking so awfully pretty. Have you ever been in love with anyone ? ”

This last question was shot out suddenly but deliberately, and the effect upon Sœur Amélie was so dreadful, that, in spite of my anger against her, I could hardly forgive Hector for the irresistible chuckle of laughter which burst from him.

She literally gasped for breath, and, with both hands up before her withered face, she cried out, "Oh ! oh !" in a voice which did not sound to me like hers at all, but like the voice of someone who had been badly hurt. The next instant she was all herself, shocked and astonished, reddening, gesticulating, flapping the wings of her cornette, as she declared that that child was a "demon, a true little demon ;" but she looked so miserably uncomfortable, that Grandmère said :

"It is all one, ma Sœur. There is nothing to agitate yourself about if in the past you have had your experience. There are many things in life, and, with the rest, a little love comes in turn to all of us. Go along out of doors now, children, and talk no more stupidities."

Hector had another burst of chuckling as we went down the lane.

"I don't see anything so amusing," I said, rather indignantly, "I think you hurt her."

When he saw I wasn't amused he stopped laughing, and said, "Why shouldn't I? It served her right for saying nasty things. Girls always think that they may

hurt as much as they like, and that it is a great shame if anyone hurts them back again."

Sœur Amélie never abused the soldiers again in Hector's presence, but I am sure she disliked him all the more from that time. He said he thought people were silly who minded about being disliked when they were able to do the things they really wanted to do. It was like wanting to buy without paying the money. I understand better now what he meant, but I suppose I always was silly, for I minded very much not only about being disliked myself, but about him being disliked also.

That same day Hector said he wanted to see Baptiste's mill at work, and we went down immediately after dinner through the woods. The river wound past Lagrace's métairie, and as we went we saw Lagrace and his family in the vineyard cutting grapes. Hector asked Irma why she did it.

"I obey my father," she said, sadly. "We are very poor, and he is afraid because of the soldiers."

The métairie did look poor with its weather-stained walls and broken shutters, and patched clothes hanging out to dry upon a line. We were struck by the contrast between it and the mill, for the miller's land came next after Lagrace's on the river bank. The wheel was not at work when we reached the mill, and the stream spread out into a clear full pond under the

chestnut trees above the dam. The trees were laden with fruit that year, the woods were already turning gold, and the red-tiled mill, which was reflected with them in the clear still water, seemed a rich and comfortable place to live in.

Baptiste looked like a rich and comfortable miller, too, when we got round to the front of his house and saw him in his dining-room. It was a festival day apparently at the mill, for at ordinary times Baptiste dined in the kitchen, and he was not alone. We saw through the vine-covered frame of the open window the round table set in the middle of the low dining-room with its dessert and wine bottles. The miller, with his back to the big sideboard, leaned forward on the table smoking a cigarette, and leisurely stirring his cup of coffee, while on one side of him sat Marie Monthez, and on the other a nice-looking woman, whom we instantly guessed to be her mother. The smoke from his cigarette curled over their heads; they looked very much at their ease. In the kitchen, on the other side of the passage, Marie Anna was clattering the dishes in a way which with Madelon at home meant temper.

We did not wish to disturb the miller, so we went round the back and asked Marie Anna if he were going to work the mill that day. She didn't know anything about it, she said, nor about him either, it

seemed. She used to be of opinion that he had inherited a little common-sense from his parents, but since he had taken to giving dinner-parties in the middle of the week, and to behaving like a young fool of twenty, she found that she had been mistaken. For her part she had had enough of it, and if things were to be conducted like this, the sooner she went home to her son the better.

She said all this as much to her dishes as to us, and Hector, who was anxious to find out about the mill, thought he would pacify her I suppose by saying :

“Oh, well, when the miller is married you will be able to go home to your son quite comfortably.” But his remark had anything but a pacifying effect. Marie Anna dashed a plate into the plate-rack.

“When the miller is married !” she exclaimed, contemptuously. “He’s not married yet, and won’t be at Martinmas if he doesn’t change his tactics, great fool. Not knowing what he wants. Ah ! if his mother was here she’d soon bring him to reason. Talk to me of men ; they are all the same. From the day of their birth to the day of their death they must have women to arrange their affairs. First we must feed them, and then we must serve them, then we must nurse them, and in the end they generally have the ingratitude to die first, and to leave us with a coffin to contemplate,

asking ourselves if it was all worth while. I know them, allez ; I've seen them all round."

Marie Monthez opened the door of the dining-room opposite, and came into the kitchen as the last words were being uttered.

"What do you say, foster-mother?" she asked in Gascon. And we saw at once that whoever Marie Anna was angry with, it was not with Marie Monthez.

"I say," she replied, with as near an approach to good-humour as she often displayed, "that those women who are not yet bothered with a man to look after, would do very well to keep their independence. If only they knew what it is, they wouldn't be in a hurry to slip on their wedding-rings. Some men may have qualities, but the foundation of them all is the same, egoism, egoism, always egoism. After that, what's the good of talking ; I've talked for forty years, and I've never prevented a marriage that I know of."

Marie Monthez laughed.

"Shall I tell you why?" she asked ; "because you speak to human nature, and you forget one half of it. If men like to receive, women like also to give, and everything arranges itself quite simply."

"Women like you, I daresay," grumbled Marie Anna. "Not women like me. I'd like to take them by the hair and knock their heads together, when I see them imbecile and self-glorious as they are."

There, don't speak of them ! I've lived all my life with a man under my nose, till I have finished by having a horror of the whole lot ! What do they want now in the dining-room ? ”

“ They don't want anything,” said Marie Monthez. “ But we have sat there long enough, and I came out to have a chat with you. First give me the keys, and I will go and fetch those fine shirts I was mending last time.”

“ Go ! go ! It is not I who would mend them in your place,” muttered Marie Anna as Marie Monthez mounted the stairs, swinging the bunch of keys on her forefinger as she went.

We had been waiting all this time near the open door of the yard, not quite knowing whether to go or stay ; but Marie Anna did not pay the smallest attention to us. She set a plate for herself on the end of the kitchen table, and having taken a large loaf of bread from the cupboard, and a little red earthen pot from the fire, she proceeded to eat her soup with the utmost unconcern. I began to feel that our attempt to see the mill was a failure, and I glanced at Hector to see whether he thought of retiring, but he had pulled his beloved *Avicéptologie* from his pocket, and was already seated on the doorstep, reading with an unconcern quite equal to that with which Marie Anna was eating her dinner.

It was rather uncomfortable to sit there waiting between them, and I was wishing that Marie Monthez would come down again, when the inner door of the kitchen opened and the miller appeared, looking very jovial and full of dinner.

"Marie Anna," he said, "I would like, that is, we would like a little glass of brandy after our coffee."

Marie Anna paid no attention. She did not seem to see him or hear him till he had repeated his request. Then she lifted her head from her soup-plate, and remarked sharply that she should have thought two bottles of good wine was enough expense to make for dinner on a working day.

"I told you, Marie Anna, that I had good reasons for giving this dinner," he urged, with the manner of one who wishes to give no offence. "And since brandy is asked for, you would not have me refuse it?"

"Madame Monthez has asked for brandy?"

"I don't say Madame Monthez asked for it," he answered, reddening like a schoolboy under her sharp eyes. "But after all, the brandy is mine; I have a right to drink it if I please."

"Oh, certainly, you will do what you please! You may use your brandy to wash the clothes with, if you like, and it will be all one to me. Are your affairs my affairs? Not at all! I shall soon have left you to throw your money out of the windows at your plea-

sure. And I promise you that then it won't be only by these windows it will go," she nodded towards the front of the house, "but by those."

The miller followed her hand with his eyes, as she pointed with an expressive jerk of her thumb to the windows of the back kitchen, and perhaps he saw in his mind all the old women in the neighbourhood coming in to rob him when she was no longer there to defend his substance, for he said, in a very humble voice :

"It is true, Marie Anna, it is true. I know that if you were not there they would rob me on all sides. Nevertheless, we have a good store of that '58 brandy in the cellar. It is not often that I open a bottle, and I would like to complete the dinner."

Marie Anna muttered something in her plate. I did not hear it. He did apparently, for he lost patience, and said, with his red face growing redder :

"Enfin, Marie Anna, I am the master here, and I have the right to take my ease when I like."

"Oh yes, you are the master here !" she answered sarcastically. And as if that statement had made an end of the matter, she took up her spoon and applied herself wholly to her soup.

"You have the keys?" he asked, after waiting uneasily for a minute.

"No, I have not."

"Well! you will bring the brandy?" and, glad to escape, he retreated towards the door.

But at this Marie Anna raised her head indignantly.

"Very certainly I will not bring the brandy!" she exclaimed. "What! in addition to all my other work, I am to trudge now up and down to the cellar for you. Since when have you become such a fine gentleman that you cannot enter your own cellar. Ah! if your parents could see you they would say truly it was worth while to bring up a son with order and common-sense. Go your own way! Go your own way! There will soon be no cellar for you to enter."

She rose as she spoke, and proceeded to wash her plate and glass and spoon at the sink.

"A thousand pests be upon women. How does she expect me to go to the cellar when she won't give me the keys!" the miller muttered half under his breath. But I don't think Marie Anna heard that, as she had grown a little deaf with increasing age; and though he abused her, he knew, I suppose, that she did not mean to let him have what he wanted, and that he might as well give in soon as late, for aloud he only said:

"Oh, well, Marie Anna, perhaps you are right. Brandy is not necessary after dinner, and it is probable that Madame Monthez does not care for it. She is very sober in eating and drinking."

He gave one rueful glance at the cellar-door, and with disappointment spreading on his broad red face, he went away.

I wondered for a moment if Marie Anna was going to relent and call him back. Far from doing anything of the sort, she remarked to her plates as the door closed after him :

“Quite the contrary! Madame Monthez likes a little glass of cognac after her coffee better than most people. But it is not I who will help to soften her for your silly plans. May she keep some common-sense, I ask no more.”

Hector had looked up from his book while this little scene was taking place, and at the sight of Marie Anna, with her sharp hooked nose and little withered bare arms, victoriously perched on a stool by the sink, while the big miller slunk shamefaced away, he whispered to me that she was like one of the hens at home driving our big dog Marius out of the yard. Marie Monthez came down again while we were both laughing. She asked what was amusing us, and Hector, with the perfect frankness and simplicity he always showed towards people whom he liked, told her at once what it was. I was afraid she might be vexed, but his description of the scene made her laugh too.

“Poor M. Baptiste,” she said; “people laugh at

him, and Marie Anna ill-treats him shamefully, but he is good underneath, and if he fell into good hands, he would astonish everyone by all he would do. It was not amiable of you to refuse him his brandy," she added to Marie Anna, "and if you play him such tricks, it is not astonishing that he should become egoist to defend himself."

Nevertheless, she did not attempt to get the brandy for him, but settled down quietly to her work, and we children, hoping that without brandy there was more chance of the miller returning to his work that day, sauntered off to inspect as we could the outside of the mill.

CHAPTER XIV.

IT was uninteresting to wander about looking at the outside of a mill which was not at work, and, when Hector had examined the wheel, and climbed on the gate which shut the water off, and looked long enough down the narrow channel where, when the mill was working, the now quiet water rushed and foamed, we sauntered into the chestnut woods to peer about after our usual fashion.

The bracken was high under the trees, and here and there I remember a tall rose-coloured fox-glove caught the light, and seemed to glow in the green gold haze which the strong afternoon sun spread round us through the woods. There were not many birds, but the squirrels were at work in the branches of the beech and chestnut trees, and we were soon so interested in watching them and in racing along the ground with our heads in the air trying to keep pace with their flying progress through the tree-tops, that we took very little heed of time, and would have entirely forgotten

the mill and the miller, had we not, later in the afternoon, seen the miller walking in the wood.

He was talking to somebody, and, to our very great surprise, we saw, as we drew nearer, that that somebody was Hector's tramp. Just as we came in sight, the miller gave him a piece of money, and said :

"And as much more if you succeed in taking it. I will not touch it myself,—I don't want it,—only there is no harm in trying all means ; and before I pay you, you understand that I must see it."

"Be easy," said the tramp ; and at that moment, the miller caught sight of us.

We were staring at him in such a rude, curious way, that I didn't wonder he looked vexed, but he seemed really, as Marie Monthez said, better than people thought him, for he only spoke a little more sharply to the tramp as he bid him be off now, and understand that that was the last money he would get for a long time, and to us he said that he understood we wanted to see the mill at work, and if we liked he would show it to us now—he was going in to turn the water on.

We had given up hoping to see the mill that afternoon, and this unexpected proposal completely put the tramp out of our minds. We went back with delight by Baptiste's side, and in the powdery rooms and white floured staircases of the mill we forgot even our objections to the miller himself.

Once the mill was at work, he said, he would have to attend to his business, but he showed us over everything before he turned the water on, and then he took us into a little room above the mill wheel, from the windows of which he told us to watch the rush of the water. It had one window nearly over the wheel, and another from which we could look across the mill-pond up the river. Some children were throwing sticks into a chestnut tree on the right-hand shore of the mill-pond; and we recognized the Baptiste that we knew in the displeasure with which the miller caught sight of them. He forgot for a moment both us and the mill, and exclaimed angrily:

“What are those children doing there? They seem to be taking strange liberties with my trees!”

They were indeed taking strange liberties, for as stick after stick flew up into the tree, the half-ripe chestnuts pattered down amid cries of delight from the children, and as each bright splash announced a bunch of nuts in the water, there was a rush to the edge of the pond and an outstretching of hands and sticks to save it, a holding on of some to the pinafores of others, and shouts of triumph over every rescue. It was evident that no thought of concealment spoilt the fun, and the joyous excitement was so infectious that Hector looked up with sparkling eyes, expecting the miller himself to sympathize when five little blue-pina-

fored figures formed themselves into a chain, and five little round faces glowed with interest to see the foremost pair of arms stretched to their furthest in the endeavour to fish up a fine bunch of prickly husks which the current was carrying slowly and surely out of reach. The miller was not to be touched with sympathy of that kind.

"They are the little Lagraces," he said, in the worried tone of one who announces a misfortune. "It is Marie Anna who will soap their heads if she catches them."

He left us as he spoke, but we were too much interested in the chestnut-gathering to care for the moment about seeing the mill-wheel turn. The bunch of prickly husks could not be saved. It was abandoned to the river, and with renewed energy a shower of sticks was flung again into the chestnut-tree. Down came the nuts on every side, the riper ones bursting as they fell, and making with their snow-white linings bright points of light upon the ground. The children ran hither and thither to gather the treasure, and Hector and I were laughing to see them, almost as merrily as they laughed, when a great shower of nuts fell in the water. There was a leaping of bright drops in the sun, a widening of glassy circles on the water, a burst of joyous shouts from the children, a confused rush to the river-side, then suddenly a heavy splash,

and all the mixed sounds joined in one loud cry of fear and grief.

I scarcely saw what had happened. One of the smallest had fallen in. The others, in a miserable group, were stretching vainly the little hands and sticks which a moment before had proved too short to secure the floating chestnuts.

"Oh, and the water's deep," I cried, "the water's deep."

Hector was already standing on the window-sill, his pinafore and coat thrown off.

"Tell them not to turn on the water," he said. And before I knew what he was going to do, there was another splash on our side of the pond. I thought Hector too would die; the mill seemed to rock with me, the sky and the river and the trees all mixed and whirled before my eyes. The next instant his head came up above the water. I saw the sunlight on his face as he struck out with steady strokes for the opposite shore. I understood that he knew how to swim, and I never shall forget the feeling of faith I had suddenly in his strength.

I shouted with all my force across the pond to the other children.

"Do not be afraid. He will save her." Then, without a moment's delay, I ran to stop, as he had bid me, the turning on of the water. The miller had

shown us on the way up the place where he stood to turn the water on. I made myself remember it as I ran down the little stairs, and I reached the spot just in time to put my hand on the arm of the miller's man, who was going to work.

I told him what had happened. I asked where the miller was. He said the miller had just gone up round the pond. Then he seized a rope that was lying at hand, and we both ran out over the little bridge, and as fast as we could go in the direction of the chestnut-tree.

But even to run as we did through the mill garden and along the bank took a long time. Before we reached the chestnut-tree we were no longer needed, for as we mounted the bit of rising ground which led to it, we saw Hector already on the bank, sturdily running in the direction of the mill, the water pouring in little streams from his shirt and trousers, but a dripping child in his arms, and the group of brothers and sisters, silent and awe-stricken, trotting after him. It was little Jeanne Lagrace whom he had saved. She was insensible, and I think that even then he was not sure that he had saved her, for he took no notice of anything, and did not seem to see us or to hear our voices as he hurried on towards the house, with his white face set strong and firm like a man's.

We had not seen the miller. He met us almost at the threshold.

"What is this?" he cried; "what is this? How wet you are!" And then, filling up the doorway with his burly form, "Don't go in, you will make a mess, and Marie Anna will be furious."

We could not pass him, and Hector spoke for the first time:

"Bother Marie Anna, and you too. Stand aside!"

The order was given with such decision that Baptiste did stand aside, and reddening and protesting followed us through the dining-room, as Hector walked on without hesitation into the guest-chamber of the mill. There on the best bed in the middle of the best coverlet he laid the wet unconscious child, and while the miller tried in vain to defend himself from the sarcasms of Marie Anna, who came from the kitchen at the noise, Hector appealed to Marie Monthez and her mother to do what should be done. They quickly undressed little Jeanne, and though Marie Anna could not resist the temptation of scolding the miller, all the time she too was active in help. The brandy which had been refused to Baptiste was produced in a moment, hot blankets were made ready, and before long little Jeanne, warm and comfortable in bed, opened her eyes, and on seeing so many strange faces began to cry.

Hector had stood silent and watchful all this time at the bottom of the bed, having pulled off his wet stockings, and pooh-poohed the notion of changing anything else. Now he said :

“ Shall I fetch Irma ? ”

It was the most natural thing to do, but his words seemed to embarrass everybody. The miller and Madame Monthez looked uncomfortable ; Marie Anna lifted up her head and sniffed audibly.

It was Marie Monthez who said, as she raised herself from the pillow where she had bent to comfort Jeanne :

“ Yes, fetch Irma. She will soon console the little one.” And in the very quiet way she said it and bent again over the child, I could see that there was something strange.

Hector was off like a swallow, with two of the little Lagraces at his heels. Marie Anna wanted to turn out the other two also, but Marie Monthez again interfered :

“ No, let them stay, Marie Anna ; they are doing no harm.”

“ And my floor that I washed yesterday,” grumbled Marie Anna ; “ it might be a maize-field. Look at the dirt ; and water everywhere ! ”

But Marie Monthez did not seem to care. She only asked Marie Anna to go and make some broth for Jeanne.

Marie Anna went muttering to the kitchen, and if the broth was good in proportion to the noise she made with the pots while she prepared it, it must have been very good indeed. The house rang to the sounding blows of iron kettles on the kitchen hearth, for in our room there was absolute silence. Madame Monthez, having put the room tidy, sat knitting in the armchair; the miller stood and looked out of the window, with the light shining through his great ears, so that they glowed like poppies on either side of his head. Marie Monthez bent down again till her cheek touched little Jeanne's upon the pillow.

The grown-up people being so quiet, we children did not dare to move, and the time seemed very long to me before a sound of footsteps in the passage announced Hector's return. The miller turned round from the window, and the next moment Irma was on the threshold of the bedroom.

She stood for one moment, flushed, hesitating,—looking, I thought, as though she did not like to come. The next, little Jeanne had seen her, and held out her arms, and Irma was at the bedside hugging the child tight and close to her breast.

"Poor little thing," she murmured, "you were terribly frightened. It is all one,—I love you well,—and now you are safe, safe in Irma's arms."

"It doesn't hurt now," little Jeanne said, patting

Irma's cheeks contentedly, but as the clasp of Irma's arms was loosened, she clung to her imploring, "You won't go away. Take me home, take me home, too; I don't want to stay here."

Tears and sobs came again. It seemed that the worst part of the fright to the little shy creature was the finding herself suddenly in a strange room, full of strange people, and Irma, as she comforted her, made her excuses.

"You must forgive her," she said, looking for the first time at the miller and Madame Monthez. "She is too young to understand that she owes you gratitude. I thank you very much for all you have done. If my father were here, he would thank you better." She held herself straight and tall while she spoke, and kept the child clasped close against her. I could not think what was the matter, but somehow she did not look to me like the Irma who came to fetch the milk every day.

"It is a pleasure to me to serve you with my house," the miller said; and when I remembered that he had wanted to keep us out, and that he hadn't done anything at all for little Jeanne, I thought that he need not have been in such a hurry to take her thanks for himself. "Also, it will be a pleasure to me to serve you now if I can do anything for you."

"Thank you, M. Baptiste, I need nothing."

The miller was gazing at Irma stupid and open-mouthed. She had run down with Hector just as she was, in her short brown working dress, with the sleeves rolled up to the shoulders. The dress was a little open at the throat on account of the heat, and under the gold-coloured handkerchief which she wore twisted round her head, her hair had slipped in dark coils upon her neck. Jeanne had nothing on at all but one very small white garment, and, as Irma stood there by the dull green hangings of the bed with the child in her arms, she made me think suddenly of a picture that hangs over the altar in the lady chapel at Cas-sagne. I don't know if the miller felt the same strange sort of respect for her that I felt; Marie Monthez thought her beautiful I am sure, for she sat looking at her steadily for a long time before she rose from her seat in the shadow of the curtain and said, in her sweet, quiet voice :

"You would like to take her away; I will go and see if her clothes are dry."

There seemed nothing in that to agitate Irma, but her colour suddenly came and went. She seemed to have difficulty in forcing herself to speak, and before she had uttered a husky "Thank you," Marie Monthez left the room.

The clothes took a longer time to fetch than the short journey to the kitchen made at all necessary, but

Marie Monthez came back presently with the little bundle over her arm.

"Shall I help you," she said to Irma; and they dressed little Jeanne between them, neither of them speaking, but their hands crossing and touching sometimes as they met at the fastening of the tiny garments.

As they occupied themselves so, it seemed to me that the strange look went from Irma's face, and she became more like her everyday self.

Madam Monthez went out of the room.

The miller began somewhat noisily to open and shut the lattice window which did not quite fit its frame, and under cover of the slight noise, Marie Monthez bent towards Irma and said:

"Will you trust me? I would help you if I could."

Irma raised her eyes to Marie Monthez's face, and replied, with a forlorn note in her voice which sounded all the sadder because it was so quiet:

"I dare not trust anyone. It seems to me that all the world is against me now."

Jeanne's dressing was finished, and she turned and put her arms round Irma's neck, whispering:

"Let us go home."

"The children at least love you tenderly," Marie Monthez said.

"Ah, yes! and that is the worst. Without that I should have strength."

The miller ceased fidgeting with the window, and came forward.

Irma took Jeanne in her arms, thanked him briefly once more for his hospitality, wished good-day to Marie and Madame Monthez, and, with the four little brothers clinging to her skirts, passed out into the sunshine. We stood and watched her till a turn in the path hid her from our view. Ten minutes after we were running home, and, as we passed the chestnut tree, we saw the miller with a broom in his hand sweeping chestnuts and leaves and branches all into the river, while he cast, from time to time, a fearful glance towards the house.

"Hé!" he called to us; "You saw Marie Anna as you left the house."

"Yes," Hector answered, "she seemed to be looking for you."

The miller reapplied himself with vigorous strokes to his sweeping.

"Well, let her come; all will be in order here before she arrives. She will find nothing to say."

CHAPTER XV.

ON the following Monday the maire came out to Salaret to look at our accommodation; and it was decided that we were to have thirty-five soldiers and three officers. It was settled too, to our unbounded delight, that we were to have chasseurs-à-pied whenever they came.

It was still possible that Georges might not come with his regiment, and we remembered well that he had promised in that case to write to his uncle Pierre, who was to let Irma know. We, therefore, watched the daily postman with the greatest interest.

One day, as we were standing in the porch, we saw the postman bring a letter for Pierre, and put it down as usual on the bench outside the forge, and our hearts sank into our shoes, but when we raced down to Pierre and unceremoniously asked him if he had had news from Georges, he made us happy again by the brightness of his "Not a word," and after this we

had no more scares. The postman never even stopped again at the forge ; and between the thought of Irma's happiness in seeing Georges, and our own delight at the prospect of the soldiers, we felt ourselves to be almost bursting with happiness as the first day of the occupation drew near.

The first real sign we saw of the coming of the soldiers was the arrival of their bread. Hector and I saw it pass one day in open waggon-loads along the road to Cassagne. The afternoon happened to be rainy, I remember, and we thought how nasty the bread would be before the soldiers got it ; but the quantity of it astounded us ; it helped us to realize what numbers of men were coming, and we had so much to do with our own preparations that, in spite of the indignation expressed by Esquebesse and Pierre at the sight of so much good food spoiled, we had no time left to criticize the preparations of the government.

Every spare bed in the house was needed for the officers, and Grandmère had decided to put her soldiers into the big coach-house and the laundry adjoining it ; in addition, therefore, to our other pleasures, we children had all the delight of seeing the household turned upside down, and we worked with a will wherever we were allowed to show ourselves. The carriage had to be taken out of the coach-house and put for shelter under the cart-shed, so had the great

coach which had stood there, I believe, since the time of Grandmère's grandfather, and it was no trifle to move. I see Hector still in his shirt sleeves, his face flushed with unwonted exertion, running under Jean's orders from wheel to wheel and shoving with all his might, while the heavy old vehicle rocked on its straps.

Grandmère all the time was everywhere, looking after Madelon, looking after us, and seeing also to the farm. Her wooden shoes clattered as she came and went, and whenever we wanted an order or direction, she was there with her mouth set firm and her little eyes bright and soft.

"That's it, my children. Work well!" she said from time to time; "Poor fellows, they will be tired when they arrive here, and since they fight for us it is but just we should help them a little."

When we had finished all she had told us to do, she came herself and drove nails into the walls, and hung up half-a-dozen clean coarse towels, and then when all was ready in the house and out, and the yard was full of the delicious fragrance of the coffee Madelon was roasting for the officers on the kitchen doorstep, Grandmère took her big bunch of keys from her belt, and bid us go down with her to the cellar to carry up the wine for the soldiers.

"Eighteen bottles!" Madelon counted, as we made our last journey across the yard. "Eighteen bottles a

day every day the soldiers are here, without counting the cognac for the officers. That'll make a fine hole in the cellar."

Grandmère was following us, and heard what Madelon said.

She paused opposite the open gateway and pointed to the vineyards, which lay stretched out golden in the evening sun.

"The good God does not count the grapes he gives us," she said, "so what need have you, Madelon, to count the wine we give the soldiers."

It was not only in our house. All over the country there was preparation and bustle and merriment, as we learnt from Pierre and Esquebesse and Dr. Charles; and next day the soldiers came. Hector and I knew that they were to be marched into Ste. Marie les Bains, about two kilomètres off, and there dismissed to find their lodgings as they could, but no hour had been named for their arrival. We had been expecting them all day, and from early morning we had spent every spare moment we could get on the mound beneath the cross, looking eagerly along the road in the direction of Ste. Marie. Sœur Amélie spoke to us seriously on the folly of allowing our minds to be distracted by worldly excitement, but we paid no attention, and found it impossible to conceal our delight even from her.

We strained our eyes in vain along the hot white road till somewhere near five o'clock, when at last a cloud of dust appeared on the top of the nearest rising. The low rays of the afternoon sun made the dust seem like a golden halo, and through the gold the bright blades of bayonets flashed in sparkling points. That was all we could see at first, for the dust was so thick we could not make out either men or uniforms, but as they came nearer we could see a number of infantry surrounding a couple of country waggons, which the drivers had good-naturedly put at the disposal of the tired soldiers. There were no chasseurs-à-pied, only common soldiers of the line, with their long blue coats buttoned up at the corners, their loose red trousers covered with dust, and their bodies bent slightly forward under the heavy loads they bore. They were not the grand bearded men we had pictured to ourselves, with bronzed foreheads marching gloriously as if to conquer the world. Most of them were young like Georges, their faces were white and dragged and stained as with dirt and gunpowder, their lips were parched and swollen. Instead of the joy and triumph we had expected, Hector and I felt a shock of pity. The cross roads by which we stood were the first that had been passed on the road from Ste. Marie, so the soldiers were in considerable numbers as they had left the village, but they were not

moving in any regular order, and when they saw people gathered together at the cross, there was a hoarse demand as if from one throat for the way to the nearest spring. Many of them thrust out at the same time bits of white paper which contained their lodging orders. But no one seemed to think of his quarters. Water, water was all they wished for.

"Ah, unfortunates!" cried a sympathetic woman near us; "you look half starved!"

"We are dying of thirst," we heard a soldier say. "We have marched forty kilomètres in the sun and the dust to-day, and we have had nothing yet to eat except the dry bread we had in our pockets."

I shall never forget the murmur of pity which rose around them. It seemed such a gentle sound to come from the rough peasant throats, and from that moment, instead of any more doubt or fear, everyone seemed only anxious to get his soldiers and to comfort them.

"This way! this way!" we heard on all sides as the billeting papers were made out. "You are for me. A little courage, it is not far, and there is good wine in the cellar."

And so they went away in groups down the cross roads, the soldiers limping and good-humoured, the peasants, both men and women, carrying their knapsacks and carbines.

Soldiers were arriving every minute, and peasants

also as the news spread came running from the fields, till there was quite a concourse at the cross roads. Presently in the midst of the crowd we heard the name "Loustanoff!" "Loustanoff!" reiterated once or twice, and found to our delight that our soldiers had come at last. They were not chasseurs-à-pied that first day, only the same thirsty, dirty, footsore men of the line, and it was now our turn to call with anxiety, "This way! this way! The house is quite close. You see just there." Jean was also in the crowd. We had no need to wait till all our thirty-five were gathered, but hurried up the lane with the first four or eight who happened to be at hand, and the others followed in a straggling stream. Our officers had come by a different road, for they were already at the house; Grandmère was talking to two under the porch as we arrived; but she left them immediately and came forward to meet us.

"You are very welcome, my poor fellows," she said to the soldiers. "But, mon Dieu, how tired you look. Come this way; you will find something to refresh you here."

She led the way into the yard while she spoke, and as she pointed to the open doors of the laundry and coach-house, through which the afternoon sun shone in upon the clean white-washed walls and piles of fresh yellow straw, and the table with its burden of wine bottles

standing in the centre of each room, there was a rush on the part of the soldiers to their quarters. But they did not first touch the wine ; they began to throw off their knapsacks and belts. It was Grandmère who took up the first bottle and called on the man nearest to her to hold out his cup.

"To your health, madame," he said, as he raised it to his lips.

"To your health, my good soldiers," Grandmère replied ; "drink all of you, now drink ; there is half a bottle for each man ; only leave their share for the comrades who have yet to come."

The tables were in an instant surrounded by men who drank as though it were new life they had been given. Grandmère looked on with a softened countenance.

"Ah ! poor fellows, poor fellows !" she said ; "they needed that. C'est égal. They shall feel better before they leave us to-morrow. Now," she added aloud, "there is the pump, and here are towels ; you have only to wash yourselves and to take off your big boots, and you will find your soup ready for you in the kitchen."

In another moment the yard was full of men coming and going in their shirt-sleeves and stockinged feet. The pump-handle was kept constantly at work, and laughter and songs and whistling filled the air.

I went indoors to help Madelon to set the kitchen

table, and, presently, the men came in, each with a bit of bread in his hand, and sat down round the tables we had prepared, to enjoy their big platefuls of steaming soup.

"Ah!" they said, as they stretched their tired legs, "if all campaigning were like this, the trade of war would be run after."

Hector and I waited upon them, but they would not give us trouble enough. They chatted and laughed good-humouredly with us while they ate, but they did not take long over their supper; and when they had finished we heard a word of command. They all stood up, and almost before we knew what they were going to do, the tables were cleared and washed, the plates they had used were in a tub of water, the kitchen floor was swept. The promptitude of their movements pleased Madelon. "That is what one calls work," she said; and from that day her adherence to the cause of the soldiers was complete.

Grandmère also was pleased. "One sees," she said, "that they do not wish to abuse our hospitality. It is good that, it is very good." And while some of the soldiers started again for Ste. Marie les Bains to fetch the rations, and the others were busy in the yard cleaning their boots and accoutrements, she sent us down with Jean into the vineyard to bring up two market baskets full of grapes.

“There!” she said to the soldiers when we had brought them up. “As soon as you have finished your work, you will carry your tables into the garden, and you will refresh yourselves with eating these grapes and smoking your pipes at your ease.”

Hector and I had no eggs for supper that night, for every egg in the house had gone into omelettes for the soldiers; and Madelon was too tired to make us anything nice instead. But I don't think we either of us cared or knew whether we had anything at all.

It was a warm and lovely evening, for we were then in the middle of St. Martin's summer; the dining-room windows were wide open, and before supper was over a corporal sent in to inquire whether Madame would have any objection to the men singing a little in the garden. Grandmère said it would be a pleasure to her to hear them sing, and it was indeed a pleasure to all of us, such as we had not had for a long time. I think they must have sung all their best songs as a sort of return for our hospitality. Some of the men had fine voices, and they took the solos and duets and trios, while all together swelled the choruses. The dust of the day did not seem to have choked their throats, for their notes rose so clear and strong on the still evening air, that I remember thinking, as I sat on a stool by Grandmère's chair and listened without seeing anyone, how it was like a choir of angels singing out in the

darkness. They sang in all strains,—gaily, sadly, gloriously. Grandmère had tears in her eyes constantly during the evening.

“And that is how they go to fight,” she said from time to time. “They are fine fellows! they are fine fellows.”

I do not know how late they continued to sing. At half-past eight Grandmère sent us to bed, and I was so tired with the excitement of the day, that five minutes after my head touched the pillow I fell asleep to dream of soldiers, with “*Mourir pour la patrie*” still ringing in my ears.

CHAPTER XVI.

EARLY as we were up on the following morning, our soldiers were already gone; but others came that afternoon in their place, and for the next three or four days the country swarmed with troops. Only children could fully understand the delight that it was to Hector and me. I have found out since I have been grown up, that grown-up people can hardly ever give themselves entirely to one enjoyment, as we did, without feeling that it is wrong. We had no pangs of conscience; and except for our very short bit of lessons, we did nothing but enjoy ourselves all day long.

During these three or four days one of Lagrace's oxen fell sick, and Irma did not come herself for the milk, as she was wanted at home to look after it. We had therefore no opportunity of finding out from her when she expected Georges, but in the meantime, secure in the maire's promise that we should have

chasseurs quartered upon us when they came, we tasted happiness without one drawback.

Madelon had to be up every morning at three o'clock in order to have the officers' coffee ready for them before they started, and after the first morning she always called us early that we might see them go. Then through the day troops of infantry, cavalry, and artillery, passed and repassed upon the roads, and the excitement of watching them never palled upon us. The greater part of our time was spent down at the forge, where, while we waited for new sights, Pierre repeated to us all the stories about the soldiers that each fresh day of the occupation set afloat, and our enthusiasm was fanned by hearing how much they suffered from fatigue and want of food, and yet how well and kindly they behaved. It almost always happened as on the first day that they did not get any rations till they were exhausted for want of food ; besides that, all the bread we had seen going in open waggons to Cassagne had been put damp into the cellars of the mairie, and before the men got it, it was covered with a sort of green mould, which made it too bad to eat. Twice the rations of meat also were bad, and on those days, as the soldiers had no money and there were not enough shops in our neighbourhood in any case to supply food for so many, the men were almost starving. Young soldiers had been seen

crying for hunger in the streets of Cassagne, and the old ones, both officers and men, were indignant. Still their good-humour and honesty and kindness never failed. Those who came to us stacked their mouldy bread merrily enough in the yard for our pigs to eat, and were grateful for whatever we gave. They cleaned the knives and boots of the house, and cracked jokes over the size of Hector's absurd little clothes, which one of them generally brushed. They helped Madelon to scour her saucepans, and were always ready to chatter good-humouredly with Hector and me. I was proud for Hector to see them, and he admired them as much as ever I could wish.

It may easily be imagined under these circumstances what we felt when, about the third or fourth morning of the occupation, Sœur Amélie took it upon herself to advise Grandmère to keep us very close to the house while the country was so full of soldiers.

"An evil turn is so quickly done," she said; "and it is not even, Madame Loustanoff, as if the children were your own. What would you say to Hector's grandfather if the child were found murdered in a wood?"

Hector laughed one of his infectious merry laughs.

"What would you say to the superior, *ma Sœur*, if the soldiers mistook your white cornette for a target,"

he asked, "and it were found pierced with bullet-holes in the road?"

But Grandmère seemed struck by what Sœur Amélie had said.

"When I was young, sir," she remarked to Hector, "I was taught to respect my elders. It seems that it is no longer the fashion." And while Hector was blushing to the roots of his hair, as he always did at a reproof from Grandmère, she continued, with her eyes fixed thoughtfully upon us, "It is true they are not mine; they are a trust. We will see about this."

That was all at the time, but Hector and I were inwardly furious with Sœur Amélie for talking of our beloved soldiers as if they were brigands. They had given proof enough of their goodness now for us to feel that we had a right to be indignant for their sakes, and Hector showed his anger by doing all his lessons badly, and being stupid as only he could be.

Clever as he really was, he seemed at times to have an absolute genius for stupidity. His face used to assume a sullen expression, his brows used to wrinkle, he would take no step without asking for directions, and in the simplest explanation he would invariably find a dark point which afforded an excuse for further questions. I was never quite sure at those times whether he was acting, or whether, when his mind was full of other things, Sœur Amélie's talk did so confuse

him that he forgot from sentence to sentence what she was saying ; but I am inclined to think that what he really did was to abstract his mind almost entirely from a present which was disagreeable to him, and that he thus produced upon his companions of the moment the impression of one half imbecile.

On this occasion Sœur Amélie was very angry. She told him several times that he was intolerable, and declared more than once that she believed the child was an idiot, but it had no effect. At the end of lesson time every lesson was still undone, and Sœur Amélie went away still angry, telling Hector that he might do them as he best could by himself, but that they were to be done somehow before she came next morning.

As usual, Hector put her out of his mind the very instant she had left the house. Jean wanted us to help him to clean out the coach-house for a fresh set of soldiers who were coming that afternoon, and before Sœur Amélie was at the end of the lane, Hector was already busy with broom and pitchfork.

He came in to dinner rosy with exercise, and with an appetite that would have astonished himself when he first came to us.

Grandmère knew nothing about his behaviour at lessons, and she looked pleased as his plate came forward again and again to be replenished. "Enfin," she said, towards the end of dinner, "my system is

not bad. I think your grandfather would be satisfied, Hector, if he saw you now."

And a minute afterwards she added :

"Should you be afraid to take a message for me to the mill this afternoon?"

The sudden lighting of Hector's countenance was answer enough.

"You believe in the soldiers, then? You don't think they would gobble up little children if they met them in a wood?"

Hector laughed contentedly. "If they are not given any other rations," he said, "it is always possible. But since there are no complaints!" Then suddenly changing his manner, he burst out as if in angry recollection, "I do think it is a shame, when people are as good as they can be, to talk as if they were ogres, and monsters, and everything that is horrible. The people who do it can't know what it feels like to be good. I hate them."

"Hum!" said Grandmère, in her quiet sarcastic fashion, "you do well to hate everyone who has a different opinion from you. It is one of the first duties of the Christian."

"I have reflected," she added presently, when Hector had had time to digest her remark, "and I also believe in the good behaviour of the soldiers. I trust them, and I will not keep you always in the house.

But you must remain together. Where one goes, the other must go. I make you responsible for each other, and you understand that since you have liberty you must use it well."

We promised in our hearts all Grandmère could wish, and it was with a new sense of self-respect that we started after dinner for the mill.

The autumn sun was very bright, and the country was basking in midday heat, when we set out. There was not a creature stirring in the distant fields, and the woods were so still, that as we passed through them our own voices chattering made a noise which seemed to be repeated a thousand times in the emptiness.

Grandmère had not told us to hurry to the mill, and as her message was only to ask Baptiste when he would be next going to Montfort, we knew it did not matter at what hour he received it, so we dawdled along in our usual happy fashion, stopping to look at all sorts of things, and to listen from time to time to the tap of the woodpeckers, who alone worked on through the heat. The excitement of the soldiers during the past week had caused us in some measure to forget the woods, and I remember well the feeling we had that day as of coming back to old friends when we found ourselves, not under the shade, but in the golden light of the trees. It was a season when

the woods were changing rapidly, and every day made them more beautiful. That year was also, I am glad to think, a specially beautiful year in the Chalosse, and the whole way from Salaret to the river lay through a maze of gold and purple, and dark brown and crimson and pale yellow. Above us, around us, at our feet, were such beauties as no one can picture who does not know autumn woods, and so much had happened in the last few days among the tree branches, and the briars and the bracken, that Hector and I found almost more than we could think about. The strange thing is that we neither of us talked to each other about the beauty, and yet I know as well that his mind was full of it as I know that I have never forgotten it myself. We talked joyously at first about the soldiers, then as the silence of the woods fell upon us, we dropped each into our own thoughts.

"I understand partly," Hector said at last, "why kings don't always give their subjects liberty."

I had so often heard him talk of the beauties of freedom that I was surprised at the change, and I asked him "why?"

"Because," he said, "I see now that it is not easy to be sure you are using liberty well; and I suppose kings think that the people ought to be taught first."

I did not think very much about liberty myself one way

or the other, but I knew Hector did, and that it would puzzle and worry him to find his favourite idea wrong, so I said :

“I dare say people have to learn to use it the way they learn everything else, by trying, and the best way is for them to have it, so that they may try.”

“Because, you mean, nothing but liberty can teach them to use liberty,” he said quickly. “Yes, I believe that is it. Perhaps that’s why Grandmère gives it to us. I should like to learn. Zélie,” he continued, turning round to look at me, “how awfully clever you are sometimes. You seem to know things by jumps.”

I wasn’t clever a bit. I didn’t know anything about it, and I had only said what I did to make his thoughts comfortable, but I blushed for pleasure at his praise, and I would have been ready now to talk of liberty for half-an-hour.

He had said all he wanted to say on the subject, and the next moment he was telling me about a place he had discovered where the birds came to drink in the hot weather.

“Come along,” he said, “and I will show it to you ; only mind, you must do what the author of the *Avicéptologie* says ladies can’t do, you must resist your natural itching to talk and laugh,—otherwise, we shan’t see any birds.”

Hector so loved that book that Grandmère had long since given it to him for his own, and he knew it now almost by heart. So indeed did I, and in the course of many bird-calling expeditions, I had learned to remain as perfectly still under the bushes as Hector himself. His recommendation to silence was, therefore, on this occasion hardly necessary, but he had a habit of teasing me from time to time with reminders that I was only a girl, and I believe the feeling that I had to support the honour of our whole sex in his eyes, made me often do things much better than I should otherwise have done. However that may be, we had long wished to find the birds' drinking-place at this end of the wood, and when Hector led me to a little ditch at the bottom of Lagrace's vineyard, I lay like a mute by his side between the vines.

It was not the right hour of course to see birds come to drink, still the wet ground all round the tiny stream was so cut up by the marks of claws, that we were sure it was a general drinking-place, and we hoped to see a few birds even now. Surely enough, after patiently waiting for ten minutes, there was a rustle in the underwood on the other side of the stream, and a wren hopped down to bathe and drink. He dipped his wee head in the water, the light drops were scattered on either side. We held our breath for pleasure, for we did not often get a chance of ob-

serving wrens at their everyday work. He, perching on a mossy stone, dipped and bowed and scattered water in the sunshine ; he was just going to hop right in, when a sudden loud and angry voice arose up at the house, and in one instant he was gone.

Hector and I started with impatience, and then hid ourselves quickly again. But it was useless to hope for more birds while the noise at the farm continued. There was evidently something the matter. Many voices were raised in tones both of scolding and lamentation, and above them all we heard Lagrace's, loud and harsh.

We could distinguish no words at first, but after a time Lagrace with his sons went away to work, and we heard his voice distinctly as he approached along the vineyard path.

"Enfin," with an oath, "this must come to an end ; I am not a fool to ruin myself for a child's caprice. I have said, and I will be obeyed. You have till tomorrow. After that, gare !"

Then a gradually fading murmur of sound up at the house, and all fell into silence again.

But we could think no more of birds. We felt suddenly as though we had been horribly selfish to think of them at all.

Hector stood up presently and shook himself and said, "Let us go to the house and see Irma, and ask

after that ox that was sick. Perhaps, after all, Lagrace was scolding about it."

The scolding had been so violent that I followed him in some fear and trembling, half dreading, though all was silent now, the spirit of anger that seemed to live within the walls of the farmhouse.

Madame Lagrace was stringing onions under a shed in the garden. She was a stern-faced woman, who had a reputation for working very hard and behaving like a stepmother to her own children. She was working hard now, and the onion string she was engaged upon grew like magic under her fingers, but she seemed to have no satisfaction in her work. Her face was as dismal as if she had been sitting idle with dull thoughts. We asked for Irma; she jerked her head towards the stable, and said she was over there.

"May we go and see her?" said Hector; "we came to ask after the ox that was sick."

"You may go; and you 'll see two things about equally useful to a peasant—a dead ox and a girl who won't serve her parents. Ah, *ma foi*! and after her there are still ten to feed."

"The ox dead!" I exclaimed, knowing better than Hector what that meant to a *métayer* who was not rich. "The ox dead! What will you do?"

"Ah! just so," she said bitterly; "what will we

do? The horses sold this year for next to nothing, the wine spoilt with cutting the grapes too early, and now the finest ox dead. I saw very well yesterday that it was going to die, and I told Lagrace he had better kill it, and at least sell the meat; but no, he is always obstinate as a mule, and then he is surprised that his daughter matches him. Between the two of them they will ruin us from top to bottom. What we shall do! The children soon will not have a bit to eat, and we shall become a shame and a laughing-stock to the neighbourhood."

I expressed our sympathy as I best could, but naturally it did not console her much.

"It is ruin," she repeated doggedly; "one brings us to it, and when there is yet a way to escape, the other hesitates to take it. Eh bien! I am sick of obstinate people. But I must have my turn. We have trifled enough, and now that I charge myself with affairs, we shall see if they won't mend. Nobody shall resist me long."

She looked so hard and cruel while she spoke, that all my sympathy for her went away, and I was glad to escape from her angry eyes and follow Hector to the stable.

We neither of us spoke as we went across the yard. We saw no one, and we had no need to ask in which shed Irma was. The sound of a child's weeping drew

us to an open door. We looked in. There on the litter lay the dead ox, and on an upturned pail by the manger Irma sat with her head bowed upon her hands. The children stood round, looking on with solemn, wide open eyes, and the sound of weeping came from little Jeanne, who stood at Irma's knee, crying and sobbing as if for a sympathy that she knew no other way to express.

Irma raised her head as we came in at the door, but she did not see us; she only took little Jeanne upon her knee and held her close in her arms, and said :

"There, there, poor little one ! don't cry, you have no need. Irma will do something soon which will make you so happy and so rich. You shall have fritters on Sunday, and everything that you like."

And then suddenly Irma herself began to cry, and while Jeanne laid her head, soothed, upon her sister's shoulder, big tears splashed fast one after another on the child's blue pinafore.

"Irma, you are crying," she said ; "why do you cry if we are going to be rich and happy?"

"It is that—" Then she broke down completely, and seemed to forget the children. "Oh ! it is hard. But God wills it ; I prayed to him so well. When the ox fell ill I knew that all my happiness was there, and I watched him night and day. I said in my heart

I would take it for a sign ; and God would not have it so. I must submit."

"Irma ! Irma ! What is it ?" cried the little thing, clinging to her sister's neck as Irma's sobs rose choking her, and her tears fell fast. "What is the matter with you."

"It is that—it is that—he will always think I have betrayed him because the other is more rich. And I must never tell him to the contrary. Ah, if God could have spared but this one ox !"

"It is because of the ox that you are crying?"

"Yes, dear, yes ; because of the ox." And Irma, seeming to recollect herself, raised her head and wiped her tears away with the corner of her apron. "You must not make yourselves sad," she said, looking round at the other children ; "I am stupid to go and cry like that when duty is there quite simple."

Her eye fell at the moment upon us, and Hector, whom I had not looked at till then, stepped forward with his face very white, and his eyes dark and glowing.

"What is your duty ? what are you going to do, Irma ?" he asked.

"I am going to marry the miller," she replied in a dull quiet voice.

"The miller ! Baptiste !" we cried together, too much astonished for another word while the children,

who had no doubt been taught to desire this, set up a shout of joy.

"Our ox is dead," she said. "If I marry the miller he will give us another ox, and he will lend money to my father. The children will have enough to eat." She pointed as she spoke with one hand to the ox, and with the other arm drew little Jeanne closer against her breast. Her eyes looking up at Hector were so good and honest, that to look at them would have made it impossible for me to say another word. They did not seem to have that effect on Hector. "And Georges," he said, "you seem to be quite forgetting him!"

A sudden quiver ran through her, but she replied as quietly as before:

"No, I am not forgetting him. I am doing my duty. Children do not understand these things."

"No, indeed!" Hector broke out bitterly, "we don't understand the kind of duty which makes you break your promises, and break hearts, and then say it's all right because the children will have fritters on Sunday. It's horrible of you. I didn't think you were so wicked."

His cheek flushed, his lip quivered as he spoke. Irma looked at him in surprise, and so did I, for I hardly thought he would have cared so much.

"You do not forget!" he continued. "You re-

member how Georges said to you in the wood that it was like a sickness to him here," and Hector put his hand, as Georges had done, upon his heart, "to think other people were trying to get you, and how he could never live in this place if you married anyone else, but that he would go to Africa, and leave his old father to die alone. You remember how you promised that in any case you would wait; and still you are going to marry a great fat selfish brute, who is engaged already to someone else. I thought you were different. I thought you were faithful; and if it's duty to be unfaithful, then I'd a great deal rather be wicked."

Irma's pale cheeks began to glow as Hector spoke, but the only part of his speech which she attempted to answer was his allusion to the miller's engagement.

"How!" she exclaimed, "he betrothed already. It is not enough for him to break my heart and Georges'. There is yet another unfortunate."

We told her all we knew about Marie Monthez, and how we were sure she loved the miller; and then the finishing stroke was put to our horror of Baptiste. It seemed that instead of intending to marry Marie Monthez himself, he was trying to arrange a match between her and Georges, in order that Irma might be left free for him.

"She is too old for Georges," Irma said; "but she was always his favourite cousin. The miller has in

fluence with the family, because he is rich, and he told my father yesterday that it was all but settled. I have only to give my consent to marry him, and next day Georges and Marie are engaged. Oh! he is cruel and selfish. He knows how to have his own way."

But Hector's belief in Georges was not for an instant shaken, and he had little pity for Irma's perplexities.

"Anyone can have his own way if women are such fools that they can't keep a promise. What has the miller to do with you?" Hector said. "It was not he who told Georges he'd wait for him. It was not he who told Georges he trusted him."

"And then," Irma went on rapidly, "what is that you say about the postman having called one day at the forge? Pierre told me he had not had a letter, and who but Georges would write to him when they know he cannot read? What can I do? How can I know the truth when my parents and my friends are lying against me?"

She bowed her head again upon her hands, and we remained all silent for a moment.

Then the children seeing that Irma no longer wept, became suddenly shy of us, and ran away into the yard, and Irma and Hector entered into a discussion, in which, though I cannot now remember the words, I remember very well that Hector's one idea, from

which he could not be moved, was, that Irma had no right to break her promise to Georges. He argued against everything she had to say so stoutly and fiercely that she seemed almost to forget he was a child, and I saw her look at him once or twice in a sort of surprise, as one looks at a person one has never known before.

"I am very ignorant," she said. "I do not know much what is right or wrong, but I trusted to God for a sign, and now it has come and I dare not disobey." I should not have dared to argue against that, and even without it I should have thought her very good to do what her father and mother wished ; but Hector seemed sure the other way.

"You promised Georges. Georges thinks you are his, and you have no right to break your word," he reiterated. "You chose to say in your heart that the ox's death would be a sign, but God isn't obliged to do according to your heart, and it isn't a sign. He never gave a sign to be unfaithful."

I, scarcely knowing which I agreed with, could not help believing that Hector must be right, and Irma's heart was on his side all the time. So at last it seemed quite natural to us, that when he prayed Irma to wait one week before she gave her answer to her father, she was inclined, child as he was, to listen seriously to his proposal.

"If you will wait," he said, "we will find some way of letting Georges know, and he will tell you what to do ; but you cannot break your promise by yourself."

It was settled thus at last. Hector was not content with a vague promise from Irma that she would think about it. He made her enter into a clear and serious engagement that she would not give her father a final answer for another week, and he on his side entered into an equally serious engagement to let Georges know before that time what was taking place at home.

Then we left the métairie with the immediate duty before us of giving Grandmère's message to the miller

CHAPTER XVII.

I WOULD as willingly have undertaken to go and talk quietly to a dragon in his den as to go and talk quietly to the miller after the news we had just received. It seemed too dreadful that he should be the rich old man whom Irma was to marry. He, so selfish, so dull, so fat. He who had tried to set the people against the soldiers. He whom we had always laughed at. All this summer, while we had been meeting him and talking to him and treating him like other people, he had been persecuting her and trying to take her away from Georges. I felt so dazed and bewildered by the discovery, that I was hardly yet able to take in the fact that Hector had become mixed up in the matter, and that he had promised to let Georges know what was going on. Any thoughts I had about the possibility of helping her were expressed in the despairing exclamation which burst from me as the comfortable red tiles of the mill and

the still pond fringed with laden chestnut trees came in sight.

"Oh, Hector! He is so rich. She will never escape from him."

I had no hope that she could be saved, but Hector thought differently.

He turned round upon me with a sort of surprise.

"But she must escape," he said. "It is not likely that a selfish brute like that will have his way, and good fellows like Georges give up. She ought to have stuck firm to her promise always, and then there'd have been no fear."

"Hector," I asked incredulously, "have you really the idea that you can render Irma any service?"

"What do you mean?"

"You told her you would let Georges know; but you would not ever be able to find him, would you?"

"You don't suppose I'd have promised if I didn't mean to find him. Of course I shall let him know."

"But you don't know the number of his battalion," I said; not that I wanted to dissuade him, but simply that I was so astounded at the undertaking he thus coolly entered upon, that I could not help enumerating the difficulties. "Nor the name of his colonel. The chasseurs don't come; and if we go about among the troops asking for Georges of St. Loubouët they will take us only for two mad children. That again

would matter little ; but if Irma is going to marry the miller for the children's sake, of what use will it be to bring Georges here. He has no money."

Then I understood that what Hector had said to Irma was what he really thought.

"She must not marry the miller for the children's sake," he said indignantly. I don't see the good of people having tongues if they can only tell lies with them ; and when she promised Georges she'd wait for him, she ought to keep that promise first of everything."

"Even when she breaks it for a good purpose ?"

"All I know is," said Hector, doggedly, "that if I was a man I'd hate a woman who said 'yes' with a whole lot of 'ifs' in her heart. You'd never feel sure at any minute that her 'yes' wasn't going to turn into 'no.' If she means 'yes,' let her say it, and then afterwards stick to it ; and if she doesn't mean it, don't let her say it at all."

He muttered something about "wishy-washy girls," and then he said aloud, "Zélie, you know what Dr. Charles and Esquebesse think gentlemen ought to be. Well, I think like them, and because you and I are a gentleman and lady, we ought to work for Irma. The only thing that can do any good is to bring Georges here, and I am going to bring him here. You can help or not, as you like, only mind *you're* not to say

‘yes’ with ‘ifs’ in your heart. If you say ‘yes,’ you’re to do everything I want, and I may want more than you think.”

At that moment I happened to look towards the mill, and I saw the miller’s fat comfortable figure crossing the stream by the little bridge that led into the wood. He paused half way, and shaded his eyes with his hands that he might look up at Lagrace’s métairie. The sight of him was enough to drive away indecision if I had had any. I turned boldly round and answered with a smile, “No matter what you want to do, I’ll help you.”

Then we took hands, and ran down together towards the mill. We knew that the miller was not in ; so we went on into the wood to find him, and it was not long before we marked his blue blouse down among the yellow fern by the river. He was walking up and down smoking a cigarette as though he were waiting for some one ; and whether it was the recollection of the person whom we had last seen with him in that place, or the thoughts of which our minds were full, I cannot say, but the same idea flashed through both our heads at once.

“Stop, Hector ! let us watch him, and see who comes. If it isn’t our business, we needn’t listen.”

We were still at some little distance from him, and he had not remarked our approach, for the bracken

was in many places above our heads. We had nothing to do, therefore, but to stay where we were, by the water's edge, under the spreading branches of a chestnut tree, and we had not waited very long before the sound of footsteps advancing over the dry bracken and crackling beech nuts told us that the miller's friend was coming. We peeped out cautiously from behind the bracken. It was he, the tramp! Good-bye to any lingering scruples we might have had on the subject of listening to what was not intended for us. We strained our ears and craned our necks, and by standing on the very tips of our toes, we succeeded in obtaining a good view of the bit of ground on which the miller stood. We could not hear everything that was said, but after a few sentences had passed between them, each man put his hand in his pocket, the miller pulled some money out of his, and the tramp at the same moment produced a letter. Hector had hold of my hand at the time, and he squeezed it so tight that I could hardly help screaming. I would rather have had it squeezed off, however, than have made any noise, and it was well that I was silent, for just at that moment we caught the sound of the miller's voice.

The tramp was holding out the letter to him.

"No, no," he said, "I will not touch it. You shall have your money, but you shall not have it to say of

me that I received a stolen letter. If it falls in the river it is not my fault."

He threw up some silver coins and caught them again. The letter span out over the water, and the next thing we saw was the tramp chinking the money in his turn before he thrust it into his pocket. Then the tramp and the miller walked away together ; and two minutes later, Hector, hanging from one of the low spreading boughs of the chestnut tree which sheltered us, had fished the bit of drenched white paper from the water. We did not know Georges' handwriting, but the letter was directed to Pierre, and it had the Montfort postmark, which was quite enough for us ; our triumph was great. We had no time to enjoy it, for Hector had only just folded the letter in his handkerchief, and put it carefully in the breast pocket of his coat, when we heard the footsteps of the miller returning alone.

We should have liked to run, but there was Grand-mère's message to deliver. We therefore made our way down to the mill, and met the miller on the threshold of his own door.

He looked very radiant and self-satisfied. I think my eyes must have flashed fire at him, I felt so angry. Hector seemed as dull and cold as a stone.

"When I shall be going to Montfort?" said the miller when we had given our message. "Yes, I shall



'TWO MINUTES LATER HECTOR HAD FISHED THE BIT OF DRENCHED WHITE PAPER FROM THE WATER.'

have business there the day after to-morrow,—business upon which I shall perhaps have to consult your grandmother too. Hé! It is fine weather for business."

He thrust his hands deep down as he spoke into the pockets of his baggy trousers, and looked at us with the satisfied air of a donkey who rubs his back against a tree. I felt as if I should choke.

"Yes," said Hector, in his most absent manner.

"It is fine weather too for fishing."

The miller was startled out of his state of beatitude. He glanced at Hector in evident discomfort, but Hector's countenance remained a blank, and he composed himself again.

"Do you sometimes fish?" he asked.

"Sometimes," Hector replied, in the same dull, absent manner.

"Do you ever catch anything?"

"Sometimes."

And then, as if rousing himself with an effort to put a question, Hector looked coolly up at the miller, and said :

"Can you tell us the number of Georges of St. Loubouët's battalion and the name of his colonel?"

This time, whether with surprise or vexation, or a mixture of both, the miller turned red up to the roots of his hair, and having done that, with Hector's clear

eyes fixed upon him, he seemed to grow more and more confused and angry.

"What do I know about it?" he asked irritably. "Do you suppose I keep account of the regiments and colonels of all the young fellows about here who are taken by the conscription? I have something else to do. You may tell your grandmother then, that I shall be going to Montfort the day after to-morrow."

We turned away, and another thought seemed to strike him.

"Wait for me a minute," he cried, "I am going up to Lagrace's place now, and after that I will pass round by your grandmother's. Marie Anna will give you some *gôûter* while I slip on a clean blouse."

His company was the last thing we desired, and we were beginning to say that we could not wait, when we perceived Marie Anna in the passage behind him, making hideous signs to us to accept his offer.

We entered therefore, and while the miller went up stairs Marie Anna beckoned us into the kitchen.

"He knows Georges' battalion as well as I do," she averred. "It is the 3rd, Colonel Roche. But you will search for Georges in vain amongst the soldiers who are here; he is not coming; his colonel keeps him to write in the office at Montfort. *Tenez!* without more feigning, I saw you just now by the riverside; what was it you fished out of the water with so much care?"

I looked in dismay at Hector ; but he did not seem to mind in the least, and answered boldly :

“It was a letter from Georges which had been stolen.”

“And it is for that that you want his address ?”

“Yes, it is to let him know that your master is an old coward who is trying to steal his sweetheart from him. And you may go straight upstairs and tell your master what I am going to do if you like, I don’t want him to be friends with me. But he needn’t think he has got Irma yet.”

Marie Anna did not show the slightest inclination to declare our proceedings to her master.

“Oui dà ! Oui dà !” she said, nodding her head emphatically. “If that is how it is, I am on your side ; Irma is not of his age, it is a folly. Ah ! the old fox, he would intercept letters, would he ? He becomes sharp in his old age ; but there are others who are sharper. Listen !” she dropped her voice as she spoke and glanced suspiciously at the staircase. “He is weaving a plot to make her think that Georges is marrying another. Tell her from me that there is not one word of truth in it. Old women know everything, and I know they may do what they like : Marie Monthez won’t have it any more than Georges.”

The miller’s step was heard on the staircase, and we were soon, in spite of our distaste for his company,

walking with him up the road. We lagged a little behind, so as to avoid the necessity of conversation, and I do not believe that Hector looked at him once as we went along. But I could not take my eyes from him ; his heavy clumsy figure looked heavier and clumsier to me at every step he took. I noticed how round his shoulders were, how he rolled from side to side, and scarcely lifted his feet when he walked, how he never raised his head to look at the fields, but plodded forward with his eyes on the dust. Then every five minutes he stopped to take off his cap and wipe his face as though going up the hill to the métairie were hard work, when the worst heat of the day was over. And presently, as if to mark the contrast, four soldiers came out from a side road and marched up the hill before us with a light and springing step, chatting gaily to each other as they went.

I had often seen the miller's ugliness and awkwardness before, but he had never looked to me so ugly as he did on that day, when I knew how cruel and selfish he was in his heart ; and as I walked behind him, I remember feeling a sort of horrible fascination, as though he were wickedness itself moving along the sunny road, and I were obliged to stay close by it.

When we reached the métairie, the miller turned in at the gate. We continued our road, skirting the low paling of the farmyard. Irma was turning over straw


with a pitchfork in one of the sheds, but before we had time to call her Madame Lagrace came out of the house. She looked round a moment as if to find her daughter, then seeing Irma in the shed, she crossed the yard, snatched the pitchfork away, and, without any apparent reason, gave Irma a vigorous box on the ears.

We saw Irma's eyes flash fire for an instant, for she was not meek by nature. Then she seemed to recollect herself, and straightening the handkerchief which bound her hair, she went into the house without a word, her pale face looking all the paler for the red mark left by her mother's hand upon her cheek.

Just then if Hector had asked me to go through fire and water to save her, I would have done it willingly.

CHAPTER XVIII.

WE lost little time, as may be imagined, in taking the rescued letter to the forge. Esquebesse happened to be with Pierre. It was he who opened it and read aloud the contents. It came, as we had thought, from Georges, and the date showed that it must have arrived the very day we saw the postman stop outside the forge. In it Georges told how his colonel was obliged to keep him at Montfort, because of the sudden death of one of the non-commissioned officers, and how this same unexpected circumstance had given him his promotion. "But," he said, "if it is Irma who reads this letter to you, she is to know that they might make me Marshal of France, and it would not give me the same pleasure as only to see her ; for I think of her night and day, and it seems to me I can never be satisfied till I touch her hand again." And the miller had almost made her believe that



Georges was forgetting her ! Hector and I boiled over with indignation.

“Ha !” said Pierre, “it is with good reason that they never let her come now to the forge ; they fear that she may hear the truth. But it is you, Esquebesse, who must charge yourself with letting her know it. And since we have discovered the plot that Messer Baptiste has been laying, we must find means to turn him aside with a little threat of the law. What he has done with regard to the letter is surely an affair for the tribunal, and though I am not rich, and have no malice towards him, I would willingly pay a little prosecution if it could serve the children. I love that Georges as if he were my son. It would give me pain to see him suffer.”

“Yes,” said Esquebesse, “it is on the miller that we must work. Irma is there torn between her duty and her inclination. She sees the children cry, she is told that it is her duty to marry the miller, and she is a girl to break her heart rather than not do her duty. But she shall have this letter to-night, and I charge myself after that with frightening the miller. He is very soft for all his bluster, and cowardly as an old hen. You see there, children,” he added, turning to us, “one who has not learnt the lesson of the woods. He does not understand what it means to respect the lives of others, or he would never have conceived the

idea of putting himself between Irma and her happiness." He folded the letter as he spoke, and put it in his pocket. "Count upon me, Pierre," he said; "I will do what I can. And you, children, you are very good and sensible to have saved the letter and brought it here so quickly. Shall you be able, now, do you think, to hold your tongues about it to everyone, even to your grandmother herself?"

We readily promised what he asked, and he went away down the road like a man who has a plan in his head.

When we got back to Salaret we found that the miller had already been there, and from what Grandmère was saying to Sœur Amélie, we understood that he had asked Grandmère's permission to marry, and that Grandmère had granted it with pleasure, still thinking that Marie Monthez was to be his bride. All was not settled, he had told her, yet, but it was his intention to come and ask for her consent in form, after his return from Montfort.

Our promise to Esquebesse kept us tongue-tied, and when we had heard all there was to hear we ran into the yard, that we might not be tempted to speak of the subject so near our hearts. But even there among the new soldiers we were not to forget it.

Instead of the red legs and blue coats to which our eyes had now become accustomed, we saw in

the yard and washhouse a mass of dull, dark green.

"What regiment do you belong to?" Hector asked of the first man we reached.

"What regiment, my little chap?" he replied, turning on us a face as bright as a polished apple, "the best regiment in the whole service of France—the Little Chasseurs."

They had come at last. Though we knew now that Georges would not come, it was a pleasure to us to see his regiment, and indeed they were, of all the soldiers we had received, the brightest and most good-humoured.

Tired! they said, in answer to our enquiries. Not they. A march of twenty kilomètres might tire those hulking infantry men, but as for them they would undertake to run forty at their little trot, and be as fresh at the end as at the beginning. Hungry! Ah bah! when you were hungry in time of war you must tighten your belt. That was dinner enough for soldiers. Nevertheless they did ample justice to Madelon's soup and haricots, and Grandmère's good wine inclined them to conversation. Yes, several of them knew Georges, and those who did were loud in his praise, but they said he would never make a soldier. And when Madelon asked why not, one of them laughed and said, "He has his sweetheart in this country has

he not?" and another, a grey-haired sergeant, said, turning round to Madelon, "You may tell her from me, Martin Lamotte, friend of her betrothed, that she is a fortunate woman. I am an old soldier now. I have seen plenty of service and plenty of men, and I have never seen a conscript better behaved than that same Georges, nor a soldier more regular in his duty, though he does not love it, and more faithful to his home. Là bas at Montfort he has never done a thing that he would not have done in his own village. It is right that she should know this, for it gives a good girl courage to know the goodness of her man."

It gave us courage, too, for after this Hector and I felt more than ever assured that Georges and the miller were like goodness and wickedness opposed.

We were up long before daylight on the following morning, and the first glimmer of sun found us swinging on Lagrace's gate, for we longed to tell Irma what Lamotte had said; but it was not Irma who came earliest into the yard. Lagrace's voice saluted our ears.

"What do you want?" he inquired from the end of the yard.

"We want to speak to Irma," Hector replied.

"She is not there."

Hearing the voices, Irma herself appeared on the



threshold, but her father turned round and said sharply, "You go in. If you did your duty you would find other things to occupy yourself with than idle gossiping."

"It doesn't matter at all," Hector said, in a voice loud enough for Irma to hear; "it will do when she comes for the milk."

He meant it as a hint to her that she was to come herself for the milk, but Lagrace replied :

"She won't fetch any milk. We can't afford to pay for it now, and we must do without."

Irma re-entered the house in obedience to her father's command ; as she went she laid her hand upon her breast and smiled at us. We took that to mean that she had Georges' letter, and that she thanked Hector for saving it, but we had no further opportunity of discovering whether this was the case, for though we returned several times during the morning, and hung about the yard of the métairie, we did not succeed in seeing Irma again. Madame Lagrace came and went and scowled at us from time to time. We got nothing else for our pains. At last, towards half-past eight, it became evident that Irma was not to be allowed to leave the house, for when the children came out with their caps and bags ready for school, one of the big boys came up from the vineyard to take charge of them. This took away our last hope of seeing

Irma, and Hector then announced that we must be content to go for Georges without speaking to her any more.

Now, though Hector had certainly said, as plainly as words could say it, that he intended to let Georges know what was going on, I had never even conceived the possibility of going ourselves to find him, and on this subject Hector and I had the only struggle which ever disturbed our friendship. His plan was to get from Pierre the three napoleons, which up to that day had remained in the forge, to leave Salaret secretly, to make our way as we best could to Montfort, and having found Georges, to bring him back with us before the week which Irma had given us was out. Just as with regard to Irma his one thought was that she should keep her promise to Georges, so now he concentrated his whole mind upon finding the ways and means of fulfilling his promise given to Irma. That seemed to him right, and he would admit no other thought at all.

I, on the contrary, was so overwhelmed with a sense of the awful naughtiness of running away without Grandmère's permission, leaving her and the household to suffer agonies of anxiety for a week, that I found courage to dispute the point with Hector, and to tell him that I thought his plan was wicked.

He listened to my arguments at first with some surprise, and then, with a thoughtful, steady expression

on his countenance, which I remember to this day—

“Girls seem to think a great deal of anxiety,” he said, when I had done; “but a little anxiety doesn’t really matter when it is over. I think Grandmère herself would say afterwards that it is better for her to be a little unhappy for a week, than for Irma to be unhappy all her life. And the thing is that, though of course we don’t love other people as much as we love Grandmère, what happens to them is just as important,”—he hesitated as though not easily able to find words in which to express his meaning—“well, I mean just as important to God.”

I had exhausted myself in argument, and I found nothing more now to say, for I was not accustomed to oppose him. Still I suppose he saw that I was not convinced, for he continued after a pause:

“Even if I had not promised, we ought to go for Georges. Irma is there at work, she cannot go to him. He is doing his work at Montfort, he cannot be running back here on chance to see if she wants him, and here we are rich and idle, and gentlemen, whose chief duty it is to help other people. Why we must go. If we are going to sit and be rich and do nothing, we shall be as bad as the worst aristocrats Esquebesse and Dr. Charles ever talked of. Zélie, you know you think so too, and what’s the good of thinking unless you’re going to do like your thoughts?”

He spoke very slowly, and as the words fell from his lips, many conversations, which I have not repeated, came back to my mind,—conversations with Dr. Charles and Esquebessé, in which the drift had been always the same—that the duty of the gentleman was to work for others. It was a favourite topic of talk with us, and I had loved to hear about it, for it made me feel proud to be a lady, but I had never thought that to carry it out would bring one into positions like this. Indeed, I am not sure that I ever thought much about carrying it out at all, and now, instead of feeling that Hector's plan was wicked, I began to feel as though he were a stronger, and better, and wiser kind of creature than I. It flashed through my mind that it was by doing like their thoughts that men grew great, and at the same time I felt that I never should be great, for instead of wishing to do a lady's duty, I could only think of Grandmère going about with the same sad, quiet face she had worn during the war, and taking blame to herself, as I knew she would, that she had not watched us more carefully.

"Hector!" I faltered. But he would not help me. He waited for me to decide.

"Oh, I cannot!" I burst out at last; "It would be too cruel."

I expected him to scold me. I expected him to try

and persuade me still. But he did not. There was a little pause, and then he said, in the cold indifferent voice he used to speak in when first he came to us :

“Very well. I shall go alone. And remember you are bound, at all events, by your promise to Esquebesse, not to say anything about the matter, nor to tell anyone where I am gone. Only I shan’t tell you any of my plans, because,” and he turned away rather contemptuously, “of course I don’t know now whether you’ll keep your promise to Esquebesse any better than your promise to me.”

For the first time I remembered my promise to him on the hill. And he had not taken it from me unawares ; he had warned me that if I said “yes” it must be in earnest. Something seemed to glue my lips together, I could not speak.

“But I suppose,” Hector continued, “that you would like Irma to be helped if you don’t have to do anything disagreeable.”

The slight emphasis he laid upon the “if” stung, as I suppose he meant it to do. Yes, I was like the women he had said he would hate. I had said ‘yes’ with my heart full of “ifs.” I was unfaithful. I was untrustworthy. He would always hate me. And yet it didn’t seem wicked to think of Grandmère too. My head spun with a confusion of thought too strong for me.

"Hector," I could only say, "did you mean then to go to Montfort?"

"Of course I did."

He seemed to be waiting still for my decision. I had promised. He had trusted me. When he had to decide between a lot of things right and wrong he chose one and stuck to it. I felt for a moment like an utter fool, wavering about from side to side, and then suddenly, I scarcely know how, my resolution formed itself clear and strong. I also would choose one right and stick to it.

"I will keep my promise," I said; "I will do whatever you want."

"You won't change this time?" he asked, but the brilliant smile he gave me showed that he knew I would not.

I had only time to shake my head when Madelon appeared, out of breath and furious.

"What are you thinking of, then?" she exclaimed, at sight of us; "are you losing your heads completely, idlers that you are. Here's a quarter of an hour that the Sister has been waiting for you in the dining-room, and I running like a madwoman all over the farm to find you."

A vigorous shake to me concluded the sentence. Trees, sky, and earth were all mixed up before me for a moment, and when I had recovered myself suffi-

ciently to feel sure that my head was still upon my shoulders, the trees still rooted as usual in the ground, and the sky at a safe distance above us, Hector was swinging his legs upon a chestnut branch above our heads.

"No, no," he said to Madelon, "if you were to shake me the way you have just shaken Zélie, I shouldn't have a clear thought again for a week, and I shall need all the powers of my mind before I have done with Sœur Amélie to-day, for I've not learnt a single lesson, and she'll give it to me, unless I can make them up fast enough." Then, seized apparently with a sudden access of wild spirits, he began to give us, on the chestnut branch, a representation of Sœur Amélie upbraiding him severely for his idleness, and waxing more and more angry as she talked. He imitated so well her cracked and yet sweet voice, he chose so exactly the expressions she used, he agitated his legs in such a ridiculous way to represent her little flustered manner, that I gained by my laughter a sounding box on the ear from Madelon, who still held me tight.

"Ah, rascal!" she shouted to Hector, "ha, bare-foot! That is how you mock at people. It's I who would whack you if I could lay my hands on you."

"Calm yourself, dear sister," he replied, in the tone of Sœur Amélie, "these rages are bad for the soul."

But the words were no sooner out of his mouth than he was seized with a burst of chuckling, and, turning round to follow the direction of his eyes, I saw Sœur Amélie herself standing at the farther end of the path.

She had not heard anything, and Hector dropped quietly from the tree. But as she advanced towards us she began to reproach him in the very terms he had been using. There was just difference enough between her voice and the voice he had assumed, to make the effect irresistibly funny, and again my unfortunate inclination to laugh got the better of me. I shook under Madelon's restraining hand, and this put the finishing touch to her honest exasperation.

"Ah yes, ma Sœur !" she exclaimed, "it is time for you to come. They have neither heart nor law, these children, and they are mocking you as if you were the puppet of a travelling dentist."

In an instant of course the picture flashed before our eyes of Sœur Amélie doing lay figure to a quack dentist in the market-place, and it was too much. Hector and I made no further attempts to contain ourselves, but laughed until the tears ran down our cheeks.

"What is this?" asked Sœur Amélie, all ready to be offended. "What is the meaning of this?"

"Oh, ma Sœur !" I explained, hastening to appease

her wrath ; "we beg your pardon, but we were there in the mood to laugh and be silly, and Madelon says something which finishes us off. We did not know the time, or we would have been waiting for you indoors."

"My remembrance of yesterday does not dispose me to laughter," Sœur Amélie said, in the tone of one who reserves his judgment ; "but we shall see in the house if the work done for me justifies this merriment."

"Ah, yes !" said Madelon, "it is I who would justify their merriment for them. Taking me out from my work like this, and Madame Loustanoff away, consequently double to do in the same time."

Grandmère had gone very early to a funeral on the other side of Cassagne, and was to stay and dine in the town. She would not, therefore, return till late in the afternoon, and with the burden of Hector's unlearnt lessons beginning to lie heavy on my conscience, I was, for the first time in my life, glad of her absence.

Hector was in one of his wild moods. Instead of seeming depressed by the recollection of his work undone, he was in a condition of the highest spirits. His eyes were bright, his mouth ready to curl into laughter on the smallest provocation, his face, wreathed as it was with good-humoured smiles, seemed more than ever alive with intelligence and resolution

Knowing well the kind of scene which was likely to ensue when Sœur Amélie discovered that he had done no work for her, I trembled as we took our places at the table, but Hector did not seem even then to give his lessons a thought.

It was Sœur Amélie's habit always to hear mine first, and if Hector would have busied himself in looking over his, I could have stammered and hesitated a little, and drawn out my repetition till he had had time to gain at least some notion of what he had to say. But, in spite of the kicks I gave him under the table, he did not so much as remember to find the places. He sat with his books closed gazing out through the open window, yet evidently seeing as little of what went on outside as he heard of what was going on inside. He was thinking, thinking hard, as I could see by the brightness of his eyes, and the firm set of his brow. I felt sure that he was planning in his mind the details of our flight to Montfort, and in the distraction caused by my desire on his account to draw his attention to his lessons, and my desire on my account to know the result of his thoughts, I had very nearly, by my manner of saying my lessons, drawn down upon my own head the indignation I dreaded for him. This did not dispose Sœur Amélie to indulgence, and it was with her severest manner that she turned presently to Hector.

"Eh, what! My lessons!" he exclaimed, coming only half back to the present moment. "Yes, of course; where are my books?" he started up to look for them, and Sœur Amélie asked him what he meant when they were already on the table.

"What was it I had to say?" he asked, as he began to turn over the leaves.

"That is, surely, for you to know."

"But I don't know. I don't remember in the least."

"You can't have learnt them very well in such a case. Find the place."

Hector was evidently completely puzzled.

"But it is ridiculous to tell me to find a place when I don't know what place to look for. I don't remember a bit more what I had to learn than if I had never seen one of these books."

"In laughing as you did at Madelon's innocent remark, you have shown me enough for one morning that you think me ridiculous. But I am not so ridiculous as to be taken in by this idle pretence. It is impossible for anyone to learn a lesson and forget completely what it is about. You will find the place yourself."

"But I didn't learn my lesson."

"Ah! for once, this is too much;—to tell me you have not learnt your lesson in order that you may uphold your own obstinacy. Find the place."

Hector wrinkled his brow, gazed at her with the puzzled, almost idiotic, expression his face could sometimes wear, and began without a word to turn the pages aimlessly. Gradually his eyes went towards the window, and, as they gazed outwards, brightened again, the puzzled expression died away, and his countenance became once more a picture of eager resolution. But as I began to hope that the returned brightness meant awakening memory, and that he would be able in a moment to remember where his lesson was, I perceived that the book was dropping from his listless hands. Another glance at his face convinced me that his thoughts were far away from Sœur Amélie and lessons. I longed to recall him, yet feared to attract Sœur Amélie's attention ; and, between the fascination of watching Hector, and a wish to keep the Sister in a good humour by a show of determined industry, my brain, never strong, was soon in a pitiable condition. "Twice two are three," I repeated, audibly and fervently ; "twice four are six, twice seven are twenty-one." I was working hard putting down the figures as fast as I could say them, and, to my surprise, the slate was snatched out of my hands, the whole sum rubbed out, and I ordered to begin again. I had not the slightest idea why ; and now tears came to add to my mental confusion. It must be confessed that we were very aggravating.

"Hector," said Sœur Amélie at length ; "do you intend to do any lessons this morning, or do you wish to convey to me, by your behaviour, that my coming here is a farce, and that you are in a state of open rebellion against the authority Madame Loustanoff sets over you."

Hector did not hear the beginning of this speech. Grandmère's name awakened his attention, and he was evidently guessing at the sense of the other words, as he replied :

"I don't rebel against Grandmère's authority."

"But you are ready to rebel against mine," exclaimed Sœur Amélie. "Well, no ; it shall not be. Because Madame Loustanoff is not here you think you can do as you like. But I will act ; I also. If you do not say those lessons to me, and do what else you have to do before I leave you, you shall go up to your own room, and I will ask Madelon to watch that you do not leave it till Madame Loustanoff returns."

Madelon hearing her own name, came to the dining-room door, and her presence seemed to aggravate Hector, for he replied with open defiance :

"Madelon would have something to do to keep me in my room if I wanted to get out, for she can't lock the window, and as soon as her back is turned I would get down by the pine tree."

"Yes, my lad," said Madelon ; "but there is no

pine tree by the hayloft, and that, with the Sister's permission, is where I will put you. Then, with the ladder taken away, you may kick your heels at your pleasure. You are caged till Madame Loustanoff returns."

"Well, just try," said Hector. "I won't go up of my own accord, and if you're strong enough to carry me up, I'll jump out of one of the granary windows."

"Ah, it's easy talking when we're on the solid ground, but when we are up at a window, some fourteen or fifteen feet above the ground, we remember that legs and arms will break, and we don't take these airy jumps. I'm ready, *ma Sœur*; I have good strong arms, and when you need me, you have only to give me a call. It is I who will have pleasure in locking up my little gentleman."

Madelon returned to the scouring of her pots, and *Sœur Amélie* reiterated her threat to Hector. Hector now was no longer absent; he was bitterly offended.

"I think it is a shame!" he said, with flushed cheeks, and something like tears of indignation moistening his eyes. "I have told you quite honestly that I forget what I had to learn. You won't tell me what it is, and yet you say you will lock me up if I don't learn it. How can I do what is impossible?"

"The only impossibility in the matter," *Sœur Amélie* returned, "is that you can have forgotten what you had to learn, and that subterfuge shall not serve. I

will not be taken in by it for a moment. No ; not even so far as to tell you again what lessons you had to learn."

"May I tell him, *ma Sœur*?" I begged. "I remember what they were, and he will learn them in a minute once he knows."

But my interposition only increased *Sœur Amélie's* anger.

"Hold your tongue, *Zélie*, and confine yourself to doing your own work. If you, whom they did not concern, can remember what they were, it is another proof of the absurdity of *Hector's* excuse. He has not forgotten them ; I will not admit for an instant that he has forgotten them."

"Then I am a liar?" said *Hector*.

"Yes, you are a liar ; and lying is a mortal sin."

"It's not true. I have forgotten my lessons. I am telling you the exact truth, and I won't submit to injustice. If I can help it, *Madelon* sha'n't put me into the hayloft."

But he could not help it ; *Madelon's* arms were strong, as she said ; she did not scruple to call in one of the farm labourers to help her, and, at the end of lessons, *Hector* was carried, kicking and struggling, into the hayloft. When he was in, and the ladder taken away, he stood at the open doorway straightening his clothes.

"Very well," he said to Sœur Amélie, who with Madelon, and one or two of the labourers, still stood in the yard below, "I shall not be here when Grand-mère comes back, but she will know your injustice some day, and I will never learn lessons with you again while you go on saying that I am a liar."

"They said he was a liar?" I overheard one of the labourers ask another, as everyone turned to go their different ways.

"Yes, and he says no."

"It was for that he struggled so hard? Ma foi! I would have done as much; it is not amusing to be shut up there with the rats for something you have not done."

CHAPTER XIX.

I DO not think I have ever in my life felt so lonely and so miserable as I did on that day, when, scarcely knowing what I did, conscious only of a dull rage in my heart against Sœur Amélie, against Madelon, against all the world since Hector was punished, I went away into the chestnut wood to hide myself and cry, leaving Hector a prisoner in the loft.

Hector and I had built ourselves a little hut of branches between the trees, and into that I crept to bear my misery alone as best I could, till Grandmère should return.

It is no exaggeration to call it misery. I shall never forget the suffering I endured. I was always a nervous child, ready to torment myself lest anything should happen to the people I loved, and Madelon had no sooner shut the hayloft door and bolted it on the outside with the pitchfork, than pictures had begun to arise in my mind of the terrible things which Hector

might do. I knew him well enough to know how intolerable the thought of waiting there for Grandmère would be to his proud spirit, and I believed him capable of any desperate deed. He might burst his heart, I thought, in trying to break down the door, or he might hang himself, or he might smother himself in one of the heaps of grain, or, failing any of these things, he might very likely faint with the fatigue and emotion he had gone through, and with what would have been to me the terror of being shut up there alone in the dark with the big rats, and then there would be no one to help him,—he might die in his faint. This was the idea which at last took possession of me. It was in vain that I tried to drive it away,—that I tried to reason with myself. I shut my eyes and would have forced my thoughts to something else—I could only see as vividly as if it were reality, Hector lying on the floor of the hayloft, stiff and white, with the rats sniffing at him, and running over his body,—and the impossibility of reaching him became an agony.

I don't know how long I had been there ; I was lying on the floor of the hut, not crying, but in a state of still pain, in which every minute that went by was hard to bear, when the sound of footsteps attracted my attention. The next moment Hector himself stood on the threshold. He looked as cool and unconcerned as usual.

"Oh, Zélie!" he said, "you here?—that is jolly!—now you'll be able to get me some dinner."

His voice brought me in some measure back to myself.

"They have let you out?" I managed to ask.

"They haven't let me out; I jumped out at the back through one of the granary windows,—it's quite easy. But it's past twelve, and dinner looked to me ready when I peeped through the chinks of the hay-loft door. You'd better go down to the house. Only look here! isn't this a queer little beetle? I picked it off the ground just now as I was coming up."

He stretched out to me a hand which he had till now kept closed, and on the palm I saw a beetle somewhat different from any we had yet found in our woods.

It gave me a strange indefinable feeling of respect for him to think that while I had been lying on the ground incapable, in that causeless agony of apprehension, he with everything to do had been cool enough to observe a strange beetle on his path. I took hold of the tips of his fingers and leaned over to look at the insect; but suddenly the hand and the beetle became blurred beneath my eyes. I bent my head lower that Hector might not see, and before I could help it tears were dropping upon his palm.

"Why, Zélie!" he said, "what's the matter?"

And, as I raised my face, he looked for the first time attentively at me. "You have been crying a whole lot before, too!—Have they been doing anything to you?"

"No!" I said, "no!"

"Why have you been crying then?"

"It was for you."

"For me? Do you really care about me, Zélie?"

His voice softened so suddenly that I gave him a hearty hug. He for the first time hugged me tenderly, and after that we both found ourselves laughing.

I felt so happy, then, that nothing seemed to me to matter. It was without a scrap of fear, rather with joy, at the prospect of braving an adventure for Hector's sake, that I ran away presently to dine myself and bring him back the materials for a meal.

As Madelon and I were alone, our dinner did not take long. I had a moment of anxiety when, after she had finished, she took a piece of bread and a bowl of soup, and mounted the ladder to the hayloft. I expected she did not go in. She contented herself with setting the bowl down just inside the door and quickly drew the bolt again, as if afraid that Hector might recommence the fight. I, for all my anxiety, took no profit by her absence to secure some of the salt goods we had been eating, and some bread and cheese, and a few minutes later I arrived in safety at the hut where

a well-filled basket in my hands. I had passed round by fowl-house and garden and vineyard, where eggs and salad and grapes had been added to the spoil I brought from the house, and Hector welcomed all with glee. It was the work of two or three minutes to kindle a fire of dry sticks in the hut. I knew quite enough about cookery to be able to prepare a simple meal, and I had soon the pride and delight of seeing Hector beam with satisfaction over an omelette which he held in a painfully hot plate upon his knees. His only seat was a bundle of sticks, table there was none, one plate constituted the entire dinner service, but his appetite seemed limitless; he ate heartily of everything I had brought, and, as his spirits rose to rollicking pitch, with the satisfaction of his hunger, mine too rose so high that if I had had a wish, it would have been that it might be supper time, and he hungry again to give me again the joy of feeding him. This was the first time I had had an opportunity of really serving him;—I had been able to do it well. He was satisfied with me;—I can understand still that I was happy.

It was a good beginning to our journey to Montfort. When Hector presently told me to gather up what scraps remained, as we did not know where we might sup that night, I remembered, in spite of the pain at my heart his words awaked, that Grandmère had her-

self said, "Where one goes the other must go,"—and I was glad to think that whatever happened I should be with him. The steadiness of his resolution served me for resolution, and my scruples ceased to torment me. Possibly he was mistaken in going ; but since he went, my duty was clearly enough to stick to him. I don't quite know why the act of getting his dinner for him should have made this plain in my mind, but it did, and I worried him with no remonstrance when he announced that we should not return to the house again. I only felt as if somebody had taken hold of my heart, and squeezed it tight and hard.

Pierre was the one person to whom we said any kind of good-bye.

It was necessary to get Hector's money from him, and he was evidently surprised that we should ask for all three napoleons at once, when they had lain so long unthought of in his keeping.

"I hope I am right to give them to you," he said, "without asking your grandmother. You are not going to do any folly with them, hein !"

"I shall spend them as a gentleman should," Hector replied.

"Ah, my proud little monsieur ! you will have no questions from an old blacksmith ; but if the old blacksmith loves you—"

"And if I love the old blacksmith," Hector said,

holding out his hand with one of his beautiful bright smiles, "it doesn't follow that I tell him everything I am going to do. When people love one another they trust each other."

Pierre took Hector's hand and shook it heartily.

"You are right, my lad, you are right," he said ; "I should not have been afraid."

And with that we went away.

I had asked no question yet about how we were to reach Montfort. But presently Hector turned to me and asked, with the gentle, kindly manner he had assumed since the morning, whether I did not want to know his plan, "or perhaps," he said, "you think it's so horrid of me to go, that you don't care how we are going to do it?"

I was surprised and touched by such a humble thought from him, for I did not know that he too cared for sympathy ; and I answered from the bottom of my heart that it was I who would be horrid if I did not wish to know his plan.

"It is rather funny," he said, with brightening eyes ; "come along, I won't tell you, but I'll show you something."

He burst into one of his happy chuckles as he spoke and held out his hand to me. We jumped over the ditch together, and then I raced after him, where he led through the woods and down to the river side till

we came out opposite to the mill-yard, where the miller and Marie Anna were loading a waggon with straw.

"Well," I said, breathless and laughing, "is it to admire the miller that you have brought me here? I see nothing else."

"It is to admire our carriage and our coachman."

And Hector turned a somersault in now unrepressed delight.

"M. Baptiste himself shall drive us to Montfort, where he goes to arrange all concerning his marriage. He takes the waggon, I know, half-way, and we shall travel in the straw as comfortably as kings in a coach. The other half of the journey we must manage for ourselves."

"But, Hector! he will never consent!"

"I should rather think he wouldn't consent if anyone was such a fool as to ask him. But we will climb up there as soon as it is dark, and sleep on the top of the load. Long before daylight he starts, and as he is much too fat ever to think of climbing up himself, he'll walk before us more than half-way to Montfort without a suspicion that two little serpents have slipped into his straw. Don't you see him, red and consequential, telling everyone he meets that he has business at Montfort?"

It was funny to think of, and we had a hearty laugh

together as we walked down into the mill-yard to find out one or two things which Hector still wanted to know about the journey.

My breath came and went uncomfortably fast while, as we watched the loading of the cart, Hector asked point-blank in his usual cool and simple fashion for all the information we wanted, but I suppose the miller thought it was quite natural that what was interesting to him should be interesting to us, for he did not seem in the least surprised by Hector's questions, and told us every detail we wished to know. A little inn called the "Cruchon d'Or," at the branching of the Montfort road towards Portalouve, would be his last stopping-place, for the house at which he was going to leave the straw lay out of the direct road, and when he had delivered the straw and put up his own horses, he meant to continue his road in the public coach.

It was still early in the afternoon when we left him, and the hours seemed terribly long till evening, but Hector was so gentle and loving to me that afternoon that I was not nearly so unhappy as I should have expected to be. We took the precaution first of filling our basket with chestnuts and grapes, so that we might not starve upon the straw; and then I believe Hector tried to keep me amused and occupied in order that I might not think too much of Grandmère. We visited

together all our favourite haunts, and there was only one moment when the pain of going seemed almost more than I could bear. It was when, after the sun went down, Hector called for the last time an assembly of the little birds.

They came as usual in answer to his cries, wrens and robins, jays and thrushes, larks, chaffinches, and blackbirds. Though I had been with him on many bird-calling expeditions, I had never known them come more quickly or in greater numbers, and on any ordinary occasion it would have been with delight even greater than his, that I should have welcomed them. But on this day each fresh bird that came seemed to me another voice from the woods and from our old life saying good-bye to us, and when I thought of how happy we had been, I could hardly keep myself from sobbing by Hector's side. Even now, when I feel at all inclined to be sad, the evening clamour of birds always brings the tears to my eyes.

I managed to control myself then, because I did not want Hector to think that his plan made me unhappy and when the birds had gone again, the silence and darkness of night had fallen upon the woods, and our time of waiting was over. Half-an-hour later we were composing ourselves to sleep on top of the miller's loaded waggon, and the last thing I remember of that night is feeling Hector pull the straw round me to keep me warm

CHAPTER XX.

WHEN I woke again we were already out upon the high road. Morning had scarcely come, for all around us was yet dark, and the birds in the trees by the roadside were only just beginning to wake. But, away to the east, there was a clear soft light in the sky, and when the freshness of the air had fully waked me, I could easily distinguish Hector sitting up in his shirt-sleeves, watching the dawn. His jacket was tucked round me. I made him put it on again, and then he lay down at my side. It was too early for me to wake up, he said, and to please him I remained still as if I were asleep. In reality, the thought of Grandmère waking, too, as I knew she would, with the earliest dawn, to think of us anxiously, came to me the instant I was awake, and after that, sleep was impossible. I lay with eyes wide open in the darkness, thinking of her. Yet, even then, as I listened to Hector's quiet

breathing, and pictured the dangers of the road, I was glad that I had not let him come alone.

The straw on which we lay was piled so high and wide that, as the cart jolted slowly on, it often brushed the branches of the trees on either side of the road, and, amidst showers of dew, startled birds flew out from time to time, fanning our faces with their wings as they passed through the keen air. We, moving along in our nest so high up, felt ourselves to be amongst them, and the strangeness of driving between the tree branches at that dark, quiet hour, with no companions but the awakening birds, combined with our thoughts to keep us both still and silent. Twice, at long intervals, Hector asked me in a low voice if I felt frightened, and when the second time I whispered back that I was not going to be frightened at all with him, he seemed satisfied, and we said nothing more till the mountain tops flamed with light, and all the country began to wake. Then, as the birds, no longer startled, flew out on every side in search of breakfast, and trees and hedges seemed alive with chirp and chatter and shrill song, as dogs in all the *métairies* began to bark, and oxen brought out to labour lowed gravely in the morning air, as the sound of human voices came from the fields, and the sun spreading bright, lit up the dewy vines and grasses far and wide, Hector and I woke fully too, and discovered that, like

the birds, we wanted breakfast. Like them, we had to content ourselves with grapes and chestnuts, for my basket held nothing else; but we were not disposed to grumble, for, in the agitation of our grave adventure, breakfast seemed to both of us too small a trifle to be considered.

We chatted a little while we ate, but we dared not raise our voices, for fear the sound might be heard above the rattle of the waggon-wheels, and we soon sank back into silence and the companionship of our own thoughts. We could not see the miller, and the fun we had anticipated in making him drive us un-awares to Montfort was forgotten. Hector's thoughts were evidently concentrated on future plans, and I sat beside him looking back. The country was glorious in russet and crimson and gold, and the deep blue of the autumn sky spread tranquil above the mountains; but, with vision of the heart more penetrating than bodily eyes, I saw, through all the beauty, only Grand-mère lonely; and the pain and pleasure of that morning journey were so keenly mixed, that the inward excitement alone remains in my memory. I have no recollection of any external incidents or details till, when the sun was almost directly above our heads, Hector woke me from my thoughts by the information that we were within a kilomètre of the "Cruchon d'Or." From that time I remember everything quite distinctly.

We got down from the cart by means of a hanging end of straw rope which Hector twisted and made fast, and we timed our descent in such a way that almost as our feet touched the ground, Baptiste urged his horses round the corner to the inn. We were thus left standing on the road alone. We were on a little hill. We could see the white line lying straight for miles across the country.

"This is the way to Montfort," said Hector; "come !"

And we began to walk. Even the miller seemed to me like an old friend as we left him behind. We were both exceedingly hungry, but as we did not dare to ask for anything to eat at an inn where the miller might very probably stop and dine, the first thing to be done was to walk on to another inn. We had come away, of course, in the everyday clothes we wore about the farm. I, in my blue pinafore, bare-headed ; Hector wearing the common "*berret*" of the country which Grandmère had bought for him when his English hat wore out. We looked, therefore, like two little peasants, and we had no fear of being remarked, but for still further precaution we resolved to speak nothing but patois on the road.

The second inn was a long way off. We had already walked for several kilomètres, and I was beginning to feel faint and sick with hunger and the heat of the sun

upon my head, when we were overtaken by an old man leading a donkey laden with panniers full of grapes.

He was a respectable-looking man, dressed in a clean, though faded blouse, and his long white hair floated on his shoulders like that of Jeante of St. Loubouët, so, as I spoke patois better than Hector, I asked him, without fear, if he would sell us two bunches of his grapes.

He said no, that they were for the soldiers, and that they were too dear for us, half a franc a bunch.

It was a shameful price, and we had no hesitation in telling him so; but that was on the soldiers' account. So far as we ourselves were concerned, we wanted them too badly to care what the price was. Hector pulled out one of his napoleons, and the old man's manner instantly changed.

"Ah!" he said. "If that is how it is, you are among those who choose. Take! take! which bunch you like, and, since we are going the same road, you had better journey on with me, till we meet the soldiers. I have no change to give you now, but when I have sold my grapes, I shall be full of money."

We thought him avaricious, but it is the common fault of our peasants to be too fond of money, and we were not sorry to have someone to show us the way in a country which was now quite unknown to us. So we agreed readily enough to his proposition, and he

relieved my tired feet by putting me up on the donkey to ride between the panniers. He insisted also that Hector should keep his napoleon till we met with the soldiers, and as Hector dropped it back into the loose trouser pocket from which it came, he gave us much good advice on the necessity of taking care of money when we had it.

Hector, never fond of good advice, trudged on sturdily in the dust before us, but the old man, leading the donkey, walked by my side, and I had to listen, whether I liked it or not, to his conversation. The result of it was to terrify me very effectually. It seemed that an attempt had been made the night before to murder two children on the road to Dax; children, the old man told me, who were not much bigger than Hector and me. He wanted to know if we had heard anything of it, and when I told him that we had not, he said that he knew none of the details, he only repeated what he had heard that morning in the inn. But the mention of the story led to talk about other dreadful things, and while my blood ran cold, and I sat trembling from head to foot, he told me one horrible story after another of robbery and murder. I was so fascinated that I could not ask him to stop, and yet while he talked I became conscious of a growing repulsion from him which made me long to reach the place where our journey together was to end.

At last, to my joy, we came within sight of a field by the roadside, where, round little pyramids of stacked muskets, some hundreds of soldiers were sitting, or lying, or standing about in groups.

It was the hottest hour of the afternoon. There was no shade in the field, and the sun poured down upon the gaudy uniforms and glittering musket-barrels till the stubble, amidst which the soldiers lay, seemed almost ablaze with colour and light. But in our very short acquaintance with soldiers, Hector and I had already learned too much of their daily sufferings to take pleasure in the brilliant effect, and when we reached them we found what we had expected. They had been marching for hours in the heat and the dust. Their rations had gone, by mistake, to some other part of the country, and now, instead of being drawn up to rest by a spring in one of the many woods which clothed our hills, they were halting for an hour in the burning sun at a distance of more than half a kilomètre from any water. Some lads from the nearest village were bringing water, and one barrel of wine—the whole contents of the village inn—had been sent out, but that was like nothing amongst so many, and the instant our grapes were seen we were surrounded with a rush which promised well for our old man's hopes of making money. Even those officers who were near pressed up to us with the eagerness of schoolboys, and

hands were thrust out on all sides to seize the fruit. But when our guide announced the price of his merchandise, there was something like a wail of indignation from the men. Not one in twenty there probably possessed half a franc. The hands so eagerly stretched out dropped back empty. Haggard faces, lit joyously a moment before by the hope of easing the torment of thirst, turned away more haggard. The parched throats and swollen lips could hardly frame the husky cry of "shame, shame!" which, faintly uttered by so many men, seemed to me the bitterest reproach I had ever heard; and yet, almost savagely, the few who could pay elbowed their way through the crowd who could not, and they were still so many as to give our old man as much as he could do to serve them.

Hector could not bear it. He jumped up beside me on the donkey.

"Why do you not make him sell them cheaper?" he cried, commanding attention at once by the energy of his voice and gesture. "If nobody would buy, he must sell at your own price."

There was a generous movement through the crowd.

"He is right. Let us make an effort," cried a voice we recognized, and Serjeant Martin Lamotte set the example of throwing back into the donkey's pannier the bunch of grapes he had scarcely tasted. More

swiftly than I can describe it the example was followed. A boyish-faced lieutenant of artillery, who had just secured two bunches, stopped in the act of raising a handful of berries to his black and swollen lips, and flung back the fruit untasted with a cry of "Well done, serjeant!" Officers and men followed him. With one accord the crowd denied itself, and bunch after bunch fell into the donkey's baskets. There was a moment when Hector and I and the old man saw ourselves left alone with the grapes in the midst of a circle which withdrew from us, and a clamour arose of "Give us back our money, or else sell at half the price."

There was nothing for it but surrender, and the old man agreed at once.

"At half price!" he cried, holding up a bunch in either hand, and in an instant the crowd was round us again. But, as he turned to take the grapes from the pannier, I surprised a glance thrown from him to Hector which made me shudder from head to foot.

"Oh, come away," I whispered, "I am sure that man is wicked;" and scarcely knowing what I did, I dragged Hector to the outskirts of the crowd.

There, notwithstanding the reduced price of the grapes, men were still standing who could only look on in silence with hungry eyes and hands thrust deep into pockets where not one sou was to be found.

"We could spare one napoleon, couldn't we, Zélie?" Hector asked; and he put his hand into his pocket to draw it out.

The next instant a blank look overspread his countenance. A deep blush succeeded it; he knelt down on the stubble to turn out his pockets. The *Avicetologie*, from which since Grandmère had given it to him for his own he was never separated, a dirty handkerchief, some wire, and some bits of wood were the sole contents, and after a hasty inspection of these objects he looked up at me with the blush still spreading, and penitence marked in every line of his face.

"Zélie! I have lost them all."

I was so overwhelmed that for an instant I could not speak. The soldiers round us asked if anything was the matter. Hector began to accuse himself: "I have brought her from home, and I have lost all—" and then I found my voice.

"No, he has not lost," I said. "We have been robbed, and I am convinced that old man is the robber. Three napoleons. We had them safe when we met him this morning."

I had little imagined the effect of my words. The old man was already out of favour, and my accusation was instantly caught up.

"Robber! robber! seize him! search him!" was repeated from mouth to mouth. Not more than two

or three knew what was the matter, but each member of the crowd seemed to take a personal pleasure in the punishment of the grape-seller. The excitement spread. Those from behind pressed on those who were in front. "Assassin" was soon added to the other epithets. "Hold him ! secure him !" was shouted on all sides. A scuffle of some sort took place. A cry like a prolonged "Ah !" rang through the crowd, and when a soldier near us snatched me up in his arms that I might see, the sight which met my astonished eyes was no longer the white-haired old man in the spotless and neatly mended blouse, but our well-known tramp, still struggling, ragged and dirty, in the hands of the soldiers who had rolled him on the ground. His white wig lay at his feet. One of the white eyebrows had fallen off, the other still remained in its place. He had shaved his chin since we had last seen him, but in spite of all there was no mistaking him now. I understood why the glance he had given Hector had filled me with terror.

Everything happened so quickly that I scarcely know how it came about. There was a great confusion ; officers from other parts of the field came up. In another moment two gendarmes had made their appearance ; the tramp's elbows were bound behind him. I heard the gendarmes reply in answer to some excited explanations : "Ah ! it's for something graver

than picking a little boy's pocket that we want him," and the tramp, who seemed utterly cowed, whined out, "They are not dead, therefore it's not murder." Then, as the tramp was being mounted on his own donkey to be led away, Hector plucked my sleeve and whispered, "Zélie, let us run before they pay attention to us."

It was not a minute too soon. We were only just on the other side of the hedge when we heard a cry raised of "The children," and, while the soldiers were looking for us in the field, we ran with all our speed along the ditch, and found shelter under the bushes of a little wood.

We watched the tramp and his escort move away. We saw the soldiers come out after a time, and march in the opposite direction ; and then, when all was quiet and we were left alone, Hector turned to me and took both my hands in his.

"Here we are, Zélie," he said, "without any money, and I know that you are hungry ; but I will get you something to eat somehow, if you can hold out a little longer. And you wouldn't like to turn back now, would you, just because of wickedness?"

There was a strange gentleness in his voice, as though he thought he had got me into trouble, and was sorry for it. But less than ever then should I have liked to turn back, and I told him so.

It cannot be denied that we did feel very hungry and tired and footsore, as we trudged through the remaining hours of the afternoon along the dusty high road. We had gone out of our way to the soldiers. We had little or no hope of reaching Montfort that night, and unless we arrived there, we had no idea where we should sleep, or eat, or how we should rest ourselves. We were so tired that we walked, I think, very slowly, and it was well we did. Towards nightfall we asked in a village we passed through how far it was to Montfort, and we were told that we had been coming the wrong way. We were as far from Montfort still as when we started from the soldiers' field.

It was a terrible disappointment. I could not see Hector's face, and there was a moment of dead silence in the darkness. Then I heard Hector's voice shake, as, abandoning the patois he had hitherto used, he said in French, and with the indescribable dignity which caused the people round Salaret to call him the little English milord :

"Would you have the kindness to give Mademoiselle a cup of milk and a piece of bread? I have no money to repay you, but we have lost our way, and she is both hungry and tired."

The woman he addressed had spoken to him before as to a little peasant. Now she perceived her mistake, and perhaps she also heard the quiver in his voice, for

she answered cordially, and brought us at once what we wanted to the door.

My hunger had, by this time, become such a craving that the cup of milk she gave me was drained almost as soon as my lips had touched the brim. What was my disappointment, then, to hear Hector say, as she offered some in turn to him :

“No, thank you, I am not hungry.”

I knew well why it was. He would beg for me—he would not beg for himself. I had no pride. I accepted gratefully the generous slice the woman cut from her corn loaf, and hid a large half under the napkin, which was all that remained in our little basket. We could not hope now to sleep at Montfort, so, at the risk of being taken up for trespassers, we crept into the first wood we reached, and, by the pale light of the stars, we made a bed of dried bracken and leaves, in which we very gladly laid our tired limbs. Then I, who had been watching my opportunity, ventured :

“You must be dreadfully hungry, Hector.”

“Rather.”

“Look once more if there isn't a bit of bread hidden in the folds of the napkin. The idea comes to me that we didn't shake the napkin when we looked this morning.”

I did my very best to make my voice sufficiently hopeless, but my heart thumped against my side, till

Hector's joyous cry announced at once the success of my stratagem and the extremity of his hunger.

"Oh, Zélie, such a jolly big bit !—Won't you have some?"

If he had not been so hungry he would not have been deceived, for, though the bread was stale, it was not like bread which had been cut the day before. As it was, he suspected nothing, but lay and munched it by my side, with such comic expressions of delight, that I, for very happiness, fell asleep as soon as the last mouthful had been disposed of; and to this day he does not know that he ever ate bread which had been begged.

The night was fortunately fine, and we had given ourselves such a plentiful covering of bracken, that though the woods were sparkling in dew when we awoke, we found ourselves warm and dry, and much refreshed by ten hours of comfortable sleep. As we were preparing to leave our bed, we were startled by the barking of a keeper's dog. There was no time to get away, and Hector would not even attempt it. When the keeper came up, Hector told all that was needful to tell of our story. We had tried to walk from the "Cruchon d'Or" to Montfort, we had lost our money and missed the way, and having nowhere else to sleep, we had crept into the wood. Would he tell us the way we ought to go?

In our crushed and dirty clothes we looked shabby and poverty stricken, and Hector did not now speak French. The keeper evidently took us for two little vagrants, and said somewhat sharply that our parents would do better to keep us at home than to send us out to seek for an existence on the high roads.

"Nevertheless," he added, "if you are good for anything, you will be glad to earn your dinner by a little honest work. They have begun the vintage to-day in that farm up on the hill. They are short of hands, and, if you say I sent you, they will give you a day's work, and a dinner at the end of it."

The eagerness with which Hector accepted his offer cut short some mutterings about the lock-up being the proper place for us, and with the joyful prospect of dinner before our eyes, we were soon in the vineyard he had pointed out.

But to work for our bread was, as we soon found, a different matter to running down for amusement, as we did at home, to help the reapers, while the inclination lasted. Five hours' toil in the full blaze of the autumn sun had almost exhausted us before the hour came to serve out the onion soup and bread, which, when it was given to us, I felt too sick to taste. Hector, tired as he was, was hungry still, and when he had made a hearty meal, felt so much refreshed, that he declared himself ready to run, if necessary, the

whole way to Montfort ; but I thought with dismay of the long stretch of road, and scarcely knew how I should force my feet to move.

Indeed, we soon found that it was impossible for me to go further without rest. Though I tried hard to be as strong as Hector, my head began to spin, and my feet refused their office. Instead of walking I was presently staggering from side to side of the road, and we agreed that the only thing to be done was to give up for the present, and lie down again in a wood to rest. Nothing could have been tenderer than Hector was to me. He gathered leaves and bracken to make me a bed, and when he saw me crying for disappointment to find myself thus a hindrance to him in his undertaking, he comforted me gently, and said that anyhow I was as brave as a boy, and that he would never say again girls could not keep their promises. So, with my hand in his, I fell asleep, and when I woke, I found that he had been back to the farm and got a piece of bread and some grapes for me instead of the dinner I had rejected. When I sat up, refreshed by sleep, ready and glad to eat something, he looked on with great relief. He had thought I was going to be ill, but nothing was the matter with me except fatigue and hunger, and now, having rested and eaten, I found myself to my delight quite ready to go on again.

Unfortunately it was late in the afternoon, and, when night fell, we were still a long way from Montfort. We slept again in a hospitable wood, and breakfasted, as we had supped the night before, on a drink of water from a delicious spring, but towards midday I began to feel faint and ill, as on the previous afternoon. We had to pass through a little town, and the sight of the fruit and bread set out in the shop windows made me giddy.

The expression on Hector's face helped me to recover myself.

"Do you feel starved, Zélie?" he asked anxiously, and at the same time he threw such a glance of despair upon the shops as I know no suffering of his own would ever have drawn from him.

"No, oh, no!" I said; "I think I'm just a little thirsty."

We were close by the fountain, and when I had drunk the cup of water Hector filled for me, and bathed my face, and rested for a little while, I was able by the help of Hector's arm to go on again. Once outside the town we thought we might find a sheltered place in which I could sleep, as I had done the day before.

It was the general dinner hour, and the streets were almost empty. No one noticed us but an old woman who was selling roast chestnuts at the corner of the

street, and, as I lingered a moment in the delicious smell, she thrust a handful of her wares almost into my face. I was, I suppose, half stupid, for I thought she meant to give them to us, and put my hand out eagerly to receive them. At the same moment she screamed, in a sharp, strident voice, "A sou for six," and Hector, drawing me on, dashed her hand roughly on one side. She cast after him an objurgation on his want of manners. I saw that his face was red, and, for the first and only time during our journey, tears were trembling on his eyelashes.

When we had reached a place where I could rest, he made me as comfortable as he could, and then he left me, saying that he would bring me something to eat somehow. I was too languid to think or to ask any questions. I fell into a kind of doze, which was half sleep, half stupor, and I was dreaming of hot roast chestnuts when I was wakened by Hector's voice, saying :

"Zélie ! Zélie ! wake up now and eat."

He was kneeling beside me, bareheaded, with a glowing triumphant face, and in his cap, which he held in both hands, there was bread and hot roast chestnuts. I could hardly believe at first that it was not still a dream ; but the smell of the chestnuts, the eager joy of Hector as he peeled one of them and put it to my lips, convinced me that I was awake, that

this time I might put my hand out and take food. I did not say a word, I began to eat, and no one who has not been hungry can conceive what it was like to feel life coming back with every mouthful. The pain in my head grew less, the blood seemed to move again in my arms and legs, I felt light and bright once more, and even before I was able to think there was the delicious sense through my enjoyment that Hector had brought me this relief.

As soon as my head was clear enough I asked him how he had managed to get food.

For all answer he turned his pocket inside out. The dirty handkerchief was there, and the wood and the wire. The Avicéptologie was gone.

"Hector! you have sold the book that Grand-mère gave you because you loved it so,—and for me?"

He nodded. Then, after carefully considering his crust, he took an immense bite, and remarked, with a humorous twinkle in his eyes, "Not for you,—for chestnuts."

I knew better.

"How much did you get for it?" I asked presently, when I had swallowed the lump which rose in my throat.

"Six sous. They said it was old-fashioned and shabby," he explained in answer to my exclamation of

dismay. "I showed them the pictures ; they said they were neither pretty nor entertaining. They have bought it for waste-paper."

We neither of us said any more,—it was like a friend to us.

Our journey had become painful now, indeed. I would not for the world have taken away Hector's courage by expressing doubts of our success, but in my heart I began to feel that we should never reach Montfort. Hector, too, was almost exhausted. He made jokes from time to time to cheer me, but he looked sad in between, and he had dark tired rings under his eyes. We spoke no more to each other of Georges or of Montfort, but plodded slowly on,—each, I believe, with the desperate determination to go so long as we could move our feet.

Towards nightfall it began to rain ; still we went on and on, seeing no suitable place to sleep, till at last, wet and shivering, we entered the suburbs of a town, and exchanged the mud of the roads for closely set, pointed paving stones which, twisting and bruising our swollen feet, added such unendurable pain to our fatigue, that we stopped as with one accord. We had no need to speak, each knew what the other felt. But what was to be done ? We gazed in silence down the feebly lighted street, and then looked back into the country from which we had come. The rain was

pouring down straight and heavy ; all behind us was darkness and mud.

"You cannot sleep there, Zélie," Hector said, and we looked again into the town. The street in which we stood was quite empty ; cutting it, at a little distance, there was another, which seemed wider and better lighted, and we could see people moving to and fro, but to reach it we must cross two hundred yards of paving stones. I cared little what became of us ; I would have liked to lie down where we were, but Hector, after gazing for a moment, drew my arm into his and led me forward.

"You must not sleep in the open air to-night," he murmured in the tone of one who is uttering a familiar thought aloud. And when we got into the light of the broader street, I could see that he had taken a resolution.

"What are you going to do, Hector ?" I asked.

"I am going to sing !" he said ; "people will give us perhaps a few sous."

To sing for money in the public streets, he, my little gentleman, Hector ! Exhausted as I was, the thought roused me.

"Hector, think of your grandfather ; what would he say ?"

"He would say," Hector answered with a little smile, "that a gentleman must not fail the people who trust him."

He drew me down into the middle of the street, and, as if my words had reminded him of something, the song he chose to begin with was the English "Home, sweet Home!"

I only heard the first verse. As he was beginning the second my eyes fell on a familiar face in the little circle which came round us; my head spun suddenly round, and, instead of the words of Hector's song, the last sound which struck upon my conscious ears was the voice of Georges of St. Loubouët exclaiming in consternation:

"Gracious heavens, Monsieur Hector!—What are you doing in this plight in the high street of Montfort?"

We were in Montfort! Georges was there! The next thing I knew was that I was dry and warm in a comfortable bed, with Dr. Charles sitting beside me feeling my pulse, and Marie Monthez standing ready with a basin of broth. Turning from them to look for Hector, I saw him sitting in an armchair by the fire, with just such a basin as mine steaming on a little table at his elbow; and by degrees I understood that Dr. Charles had been passing in his carriage when Georges picked me up, and that he had driven us all to the house of Madame Monthez, where we were welcome, as Marie hospitably told us, to rest and eat for ever if we liked.

CHAPTER XXI.

REST was delicious, indeed, between the herb-scented sheets, but we did not sleep till Hector had told why we came. Marie's father listened with the others to our story, and, when it was finished, he turned to Marie and Georges where they stood together, and said :

"My children, you were right. A marriage between you is impossible. When the miller comes to-morrow for his final answer, it is I who will give it to him once for all."

Marie and Georges exchanged a hearty shake of the hand.

"The fact is," Marie said, with a smile, "Georges and I like each other too much to be willing to make one another mutually unhappy. Now we shall remain friends to the end of our lives."

"But that won't be much use," Hector said, "unless Georges gets Irma from the miller." And here Dr.

Charles stood up and said, with his kindly face glowing for sympathy, that he had an idea, and that if Georges would go outside with him, he would tell his plan. He buttoned his great coat and took his hat, saying that he would not return that evening, and he and Georges went out together. When Georges returned half-an-hour later, his lip was quivering with emotion, and his hand trembled as he held it out to Hector.

"I shall never thank you," he said; "you have given me a happiness that you cannot even imagine."

Two tears overflowed from his swimming eyes, and as he dashed them away with the back of his big brown hand, he said apologetically to the assembled circle :

"Excuse me ! It is joy."

It was enough for that one night. Weary with so many strange emotions, I fell asleep without even trying to think what Dr. Charles' plan might be.

When I woke, it was afternoon, and Grandmère was at my bedside. Dr. Charles had driven through the night to Salaret, and at break of day Grandmère had started with fresh horses to come to us. To tell my joy at seeing her, the sorrow I expressed for all the anxiety we had caused, is of little use, everyone who knows Grandmère knows that any fault committed against her alone is soon forgiven, and she has

never in her life been more gentle to me than she was that day.

"Yes," she said, "we have passed through many emotions. For a time we believed that you had been murdered on the road to Dax ; and I blamed myself to have left you without care. You have also your share before you. You must take your courage in your two hands. But remember that your Grandmère is always there who loves you as the child of her old age."

She helped me to dress in the clean clothes that she had brought with her, and I was surprised to find how weak and tired I still was. I was glad to have her arm to lean upon as we went into the kitchen.

An unusual number of people were there. Georges and Irma stood hand in hand by the window, looking so happy that there was no need to ask any questions about them. It scarcely occurred to me to be surprised at seeing Irma at Montfort, but when my eyes fell on Irma's father and mother dressed in their best clothes, and chatting affably to M. Monthez, I began to think that something strange must have happened. Hector sprang forward to meet us as we entered the room, and his face was a revelation to me.

"What is it?" I asked, with a sudden fear I could not account for.

"You have not told her?" said Dr. Charles. And as Grandmère answered "No," Hector said,

"First of all, Georges is rich, and he is to marry Irma in the spring."

I clapped my hands for joy, as, hearing their names, Georges and Irma turned their radiant faces on us from the window ; and it was in the midst of a happy murmur of congratulation, that Grandmère said,

"But the fact is, my poor little Zélie, there is sadness for you underneath all this, for Hector has to go."

Joyous sounds all round me, brilliant faces, only Hector gravely holding my hand in a silence I understood, while, with interruptions of joy and gratitude from the bystanders, Grandmère told a story which accounted for all I saw.

On the very day we left Salaret, she had returned home to find a letter waiting for her from Hector's grandfather, in which Hector's immediate return to England was desired. A terrible yachting accident had left the old man nearly desolate. Hector's three uncles had been drowned. The little orphan for whom but a short time before there had been no place, was now his grandfather's only heir.

Our disappearance under the circumstances, with the country full of strange men, and disquieting rumours afloat of children murdered on the road to Dax,

was too grave an occurrence to be concealed from Hector's guardians. Grandmère had telegraphed to England, and the instructions which were telegraphed back from England caused placards to be immediately posted through the department offering a reward of five thousand francs for our recovery.

Dr. Charles was the first to see that Georges had fairly earned the reward, and when the object of our journey was made known there was little division of opinion in the matter. Five thousand francs in ready money, with the farm of St. Loubouët to come to him, and Grandmère's goodwill, put Georges very nearly on a level with the miller as a match for Irma, and there was now no objection to the marriage we had so much desired.

I heard it all as in a dream. Irma and Georges were rich and happy. Hector was to be rich and happy, and to live with the grandfather that he loved. Everyone round me was full of joy; I also ought to rejoice,—and all I understood of the whole story was that Hector was going.

"Fortune has turned at last!" exclaimed Madame Lagrace joyously; and then, with the one cry of "Hector!" I threw my arms round his neck.

He knew what I meant.

"I will come back," he whispered, as he felt my sobs rise against his breast; and amid the ever-in-

creasing cackle of congratulation, I heard Grandmère saying gently,

"It is for his good, Zélie."

Yes, it was for his good. That was the best thought to comfort me. I repeated it to myself, when I looked again at the happy faces, and I felt that it was wicked to grudge them their happiness. Yet the joy on every countenance seemed to drive me cruelly away, and my eyes did not rest till they fell on Marie Monthez, who alone of the strangers looked on with pity.

Our eyes met, and I knew as one does know things sometimes in an instant, that she was not happy like the rest.

At the same moment she started and coloured slightly. A shadow had fallen upon the floor, and the miller entered the room.

The scene was evidently a complete surprise for him. His red face grew positively pale for an instant, and his jaw dropped as he perceived Georges and Irma by the window, where they still stood hand in hand. They were so happy they saw nothing. They did not know the miller had come in.

I could see Marie's eyes follow him with the pitiful expression deepening into pain.

M. Monthez came forward.

"I am sorry, Baptiste," he said, "I would have spared you this surprise, but I did not expect you till

the evening. Your answer is clear, I think." And he indicated with his right hand Georges and Irma.

"You mean that she marries the other?" said the miller, stupidly staring at the couple in the window.

"Yes, and if you weren't a fool, you'd marry another, too!" cried a sharp voice behind him.

We turned to see Marie Anna.

"Oh, yes!" she replied in answer to the expression with which the miller met this new surprise. "You thought I would remain at the mill for ever while you made a fool of yourself at your leisure in Montfort. Ma foi, I could stand it no longer, and I took the diligence last night to come and see my son."

Then Baptiste's wrath found a vent.

"Don't plague me with your son!" he thundered; "I don't believe you have a son; or if you have, go to him for good and all."

"So I will!" replied Marie Anna smartly, "and to the inn of the 'Cruchon d'Or' also. My son has bought the goodwill, and he can do without me no longer. Therefore I give you here my eight days' notice."

"Eight days' notice!" repeated the miller, suddenly sobered; "after forty-seven years of service, you give me eight days' notice! But what is to become of me?"

"Little I care," replied Marie Anna, "what be-

comes of you. I have had enough in forty-seven years of serving a fool. Ah, I have no son! Well, continue, continue as you are doing, and we shall see which of us two will grow old with grandchildren about our knees."

The allusion was like the prodding of a goad in the miller's pride. He evidently writhed under it, and the colour mounted purple over his forehead as he made an effort to contain himself and answered humbly,

"But the linen, Marie Anna! Who will look after it? And the provisions? It is you who keep them always locked. You cannot plant me there with nobody?"

He looked so big, so helpless, so shamefaced, that a heart of stone must have felt some pity for him.

"Foster-mother," said Marie Monthez, "you will stay with him a little longer."

"Not a day!" retorted Marie Anna. "It is for those who feel sorry for him to help him now if they like. I've borne with him for forty-seven years, and I have had enough."

"Ah, yes!" she continued, addressing the miller with renewed fire of sarcasm. "You think it is I, with my worn-out eyes, who for the last ten years have mended your linen,—you think it is I who take the trouble to renew the rosemary and lavender every summer in the shelves. You think it is I who spend

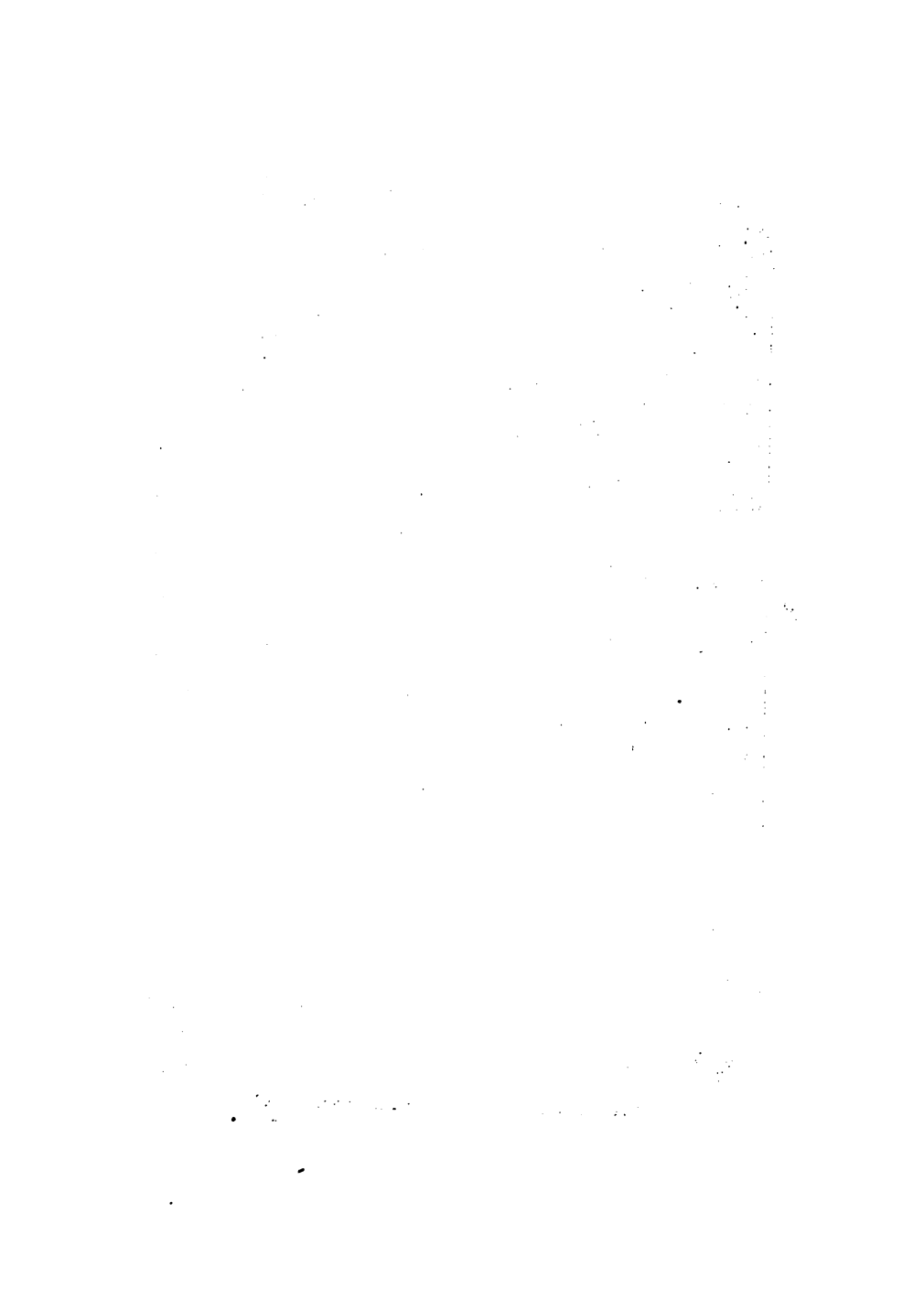
my time in seeking new dishes to tempt your appetite. Undeceive yourself, I would never have been so foolish as to devote myself thus to a man! But," and she turned to the assembled company, "see a little the imbecility of men. There is one of whom nature has made a mass of egoism, seeing no farther than his nose, asking nothing but that his comfort may pass before all else in the world. Here is an angel of intelligence and devotion, who has but one folly, that of being ready to pass her life in his service. And he, at his age, spends his time in running on the one side after a young girl who detests him, and on the other after an old scold who despises him. Oh, men! We have to spend our lives in showing them that two and two make four."

"My opinion is," said Grandmère good-humouredly, as all eyes turned to the burning countenances of the miller and Marie Monthez, "that this is a case for showing how from four we can make two and two. What do you say, Baptiste?—the world has given you Marie Monthez for a bride long since."

The miller had been brought very low!

"Is it true?" he asked, with an awkward attempt to take Marie Monthez's hand; "you will love me and you will not throw me over?" He cast a rueful glance on either side as he spoke to Irma and to Marie Anna.

Marie Monthez had recovered her composure by this time.





"IT IS NOW LONG SINCE THESE THINGS HAPPENED."

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"I have loved you all my life, Baptiste," she said simply, "and you know I am a good manager."

So it was settled to the great delight of Marie Anna, who, notwithstanding her contempt for the miller, entertained a respect for the mill, which had caused her, as she now avowed, to plan this marriage for her foster-child thirty years ago, when the little Marie was still a baby at her breast.

One other pleasant thing happened before my great sorrow came. Grandmère bought back the *Avicéptologie* on our way to Salaret, and restored it to Hector.

Before he went to England, he in his turn gave it to me because, he said, it was the thing he had of his own which he loved the most, and he would come back some day to fetch it. But of all the rest I cannot speak. We hear from him often,—I have never seen him since. He was only with us for a few months, but in that time he made two households happy. His name is remembered lovingly at St. Loubouët and at the mill, and I have often thought since then of what Grandmère said the first day he came, "It is the individuals who achieve something, not the men whom Nature turns out like buttons by the gross."

It is long now since these things happened, and I suppose I have grown to be a woman. A little while ago I felt still like a child ; but on the day on which I first began to write these recollections, Dr. Charles

asked Grandmère to let me be his wife. He said he had loved me ever since that day in the springtime long ago, when he saw me coming down Esquebessé's lane in the sunshine, with my pinafore pockets full of flowers. I am very sorry I cannot love him too, but Grandmère allowed me to decide for myself, and I stay at Salaret. Since this took place, I have felt that I am not quite a child, and I have tried to grow wiser and more sensible as a woman ought to be. But I hardly know yet which I am, and I ask myself sometimes whether it is a child's folly or a woman's, which makes me still believe Hector's promise, "I will come back."

YORK STREET, COVENT GARDEN,

January, 1882.

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